JAMES HADLEY CHASE

NO BUSINESS OF MINE

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No Business of Mine
James Hadley Chase
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chapter one

My name is Steve Harmas and I am a Foreign Correspondent of the New York Clarion. During the years 1940-45 I lived in the Savoy Hotel with a number of my colleagues and told the people of America the story of Britain at war. I gave up the cocktail bar and the comfort of the Savoy when the Allied Armies invaded Europe. To get me to go was like peeling a clam off a wall, but my editor kept after me, and finally I went. He told me the experience would give me character. It gave me a pain you-know-where, but it didn't give me character.

After the collapse of Germany, I felt I had had enough of war and hardship, and I changed places with a colleague without him knowing anything about it, and returned to America and two-pound steaks on his ticket.

Several months later I was offered an assignment to write a series of articles on post-war Britain. I didn't particularly want the job: there was a whisky shortage in England at the time, but there was a girl named Netta Scott who used to live in London when last I was there, and I did want to see her again.

I don't want you to get me wrong about Netta Scott. I wasn't in love with her, but I did feel I owed her a great deal for giving me such a swell time while I was a stranger in a strange country, and quite unexpectedly I found myself in the position to do so.

It happened like this: I was reading the sporting sheet on my way to the office, still in two minds about going to England, when I noticed that one of the horses running in the afternoon's race was named Netta. The horse was a ten to one outsider, but I had a hunch and decided to back it. I laid out five hundred dollars, and sat by the radio with butterflies in my stomach, awaiting the result.

The horse won by a nose, and there and then I decided to split the five-thousand-dollar winnings with Netta: I caught the first available plane to England.

I got a big bang out of imagining Netta's reaction when I walked in on her and planked down before her five hundred crisp, new one pound notes. She had always liked money, always grumbled about being hard up, although she would never let me help her once we got to know each other. It would be a great moment in her life, and it would square my debt at the same time.

I first met Netta in 1942 at a luxury night club in Mayfair's Bruton Mews. She worked there as a dance hostess, and don't let anyone kid you dance hostesses don't work. They develop more muscles than Strangler Lewis ever had by warding off tired business men who are

not as tired as all that. Her job was to persuade suckers like me to buy lousy champagne at five pounds a bottle, and to pay her ten shillings for the privilege of dancing her around a floor the size of a pocket handkerchief.

The Blue Club, as it was called, was run by a guy named Jack Bradley. I had seen him once or twice, and I thought then he looked a doubtful customer. The only girl working in the club who wasn't scared of him was Netta: but Netta wasn't scared of any man.

The story goes that all the girls had to do a night shift with Bradley before they could qualify for the job of hostess. They told me that Netta and Bradley spent the night reading the illustrated papers when she qualified, but that was only after she had blunted his glands by wrapping a valuable oil painting around his thick neck. I don't know whether the yarn was true: Netta wouldn't talk about it, but knowing her, I'd say it was.

Bradley must have made a packet out of the club. It was patronized almost entirely by American officers and newspaper men who had money to burn. They burned it all right in the Blue Club. The band was first class, the girls beautiful and willing, and the food excellent; but the cost was so high you had to put on an oxygen mask before you looked at the bill.

Netta was one of twelve girls, and I picked her out the moment I saw her.

She was a cute trick: a red head with skin like peaches and cream.

Her curves attracted my attention: curves always do. They were a blue print for original sin. I've seen some female hairpin bends in my time, but nothing quite in Netta's class. As my companion, Harry Bix, a hard-bitten bomber pilot, put it, "A mouse fitted with skis would have a grand run down her, and would I like to be that mouse!"

Yes, Netta was a cute trick. She was really lovely in a hard, sophisticated way. You could tell right off that she knew her way around, and if you hoped to get places with her it was gloves off and no holds barred; even at that she'd probably lick you.

It took some time before Netta thawed out with me. At first she considered me just another customer, then she regarded me with suspicion, thinking I was on the make, but finally she accepted the idea that I was a lonely guy in a strange city who wanted to make friends with her.

I used to go to the Blue Club every evening. After a month or so she wouldn't let me buy champagne, and I knew I was making progress. One night she suggested we might go together to Kew Gardens on the following Sunday and see the bluebells. Then I knew I'd got somewhere with her.

It finally worked out that I saw a lot of Netta. I'd call for her at her

little flat off the Cromwell Road and drive her to the Blue Club.

Sometimes we'd have supper together at the Vanity Fair; sometimes she'd come along to the Savoy and we'd dine in the grillroom. She was a good companion, ready to laugh or talk sense depending on my mood, and she could drink a lot of liquor without getting tight.

Netta was my safety-valve. She bridged all the dreary boredom which is inevitable at times when one is not always working to capacity. She made my stay in London worth remembering. We finally got around to sleeping together once or twice a month, but as in everything we did, it was impersonal and didn't mean a great deal to either of us. Neither she nor I were in love with each other. She never let our association get personal, although it was intimate enough.

That is she never asked me about my home, whether I was married, what I intended to do when the war was over; never hinted she would like to return to the States with me. I did try to find out something about her background, but she wouldn't talk. Her attitude was that we were living in the present, any moment a bomb or rocket might drop on us, and it was up to us to be as happy as we could while the hour lasted. She lived in a wrapping of cellophane. I could see and touch her, but I couldn't get at her. Oddly enough this attitude suited me. I didn't want to know who her father was, whether she had a husband serving overseas, whether she had any sisters or brothers. All I wanted was a gay companion: that was what I got.

We kept up this association for two years, then when I received orders to sail with the invading armies we said good-bye.

We said good-bye as if we would meet again the next evening, although I knew I wouldn't see her for at least a year, perhaps never see her again: she knew it too.

"So long, Steve," she said when I dropped her outside her flat.

"And don't come in. Let's say good-bye here, and let's make it quick. Maybe I'll see you again before long."

"Sure, you'll see me again," I said.

We kissed. Nothing special: no tears. She went up the steps, shut the door without looking back.

I had planned to write to her, but I never did. We moved so fast into France and things were so hectic that I didn't have the chance to write for the first month, and after that I decided it was best to forget her. I did forget her until I returned to America. Then I began to think of her again. I hadn't seen her for nearly two years, but I found I could remember every detail of her face and body as clearly as if we had parted only a few hours ago. I tried to push her out of my mind, went around with other girls, but Netta stuck: she wouldn't be driven away.

So when I spotted that horse, backed it and won, I knew I was going to see her again, and I was glad.

I arrived in London on a hot August evening after a long, depressing trip down from Prestwick. I went immediately to the Savoy Hotel where I had booked a reservation, had a word with the reception clerk who seemed pleased to see me again, and went up to my room, overlooking the Thames. After a shower and a couple of drinks I went down to the office and asked them to let me have five hundred one pound notes. I could see this request gave them a jar, but they knew me well enough by now to help me if they could. After a few minutes delay they handed over the money with no more of a flourish than if it had been a package of bus tickets.

It was now half-past six, and I knew Netta would be home at that hour. She always prepared for the evening's work around seven o'clock, and her preparations usually took the best part of an hour.

As I was waiting in a small but select queue for a taxi, I asked the hall porter if he knew whether the Blue Club still existed. He said it did, and that it had now acquired an unsavoury reputation as it had installed a couple of doubtful roulette tables since my time.

Apparently it had been raided twice during the past six months, but had escaped being closed down through lack of evidence. It seemed Jack Bradley managed to keep one jump ahead of the police.

I eventually got a taxi, and after a slight haggle, the hall porter persuaded the driver to take me to Cromwell Road.

I arrived outside Netta's flat at ten minutes past seven. I paid off the driver, stood back, and looked up at her windows on the top floor.

The house was one of those dreary buildings that grace the back streets off Cromwell Road. It was tall, dirty, and the lace curtains at the windows were on their last legs. Netta's flat, one of three, still had the familiar bright orange curtains at the windows. I wondered if I was going to walk in on a new lover, decided I'd chance it. I opened the front door, began the walk up the three flights of coconut-matted stairs.

Those stairs brought back a lot of pleasant memories. I remembered the nights we used to sneak up them, holding our shoes in our hands lest Mrs. Crockett, the landlady who lurked in the basement, should hear us. I remembered too, the night I had flown over Berlin with a R.A.F. crew and had arrived at Netta's flat at five o'clock in the morning, too excited to sleep and wanting to tell her of the experience, only to find she hadn't come home that night. I had sat on the top of those stairs waiting for her, and had finally dozed off, to be discovered by Mrs. Crockett, who had threatened to call the police.

I passed the doors of the other two flats. I had never discovered who lived in them. During the whole time I had visited Netta I hadn't once seen the occupiers. I arrived, a little breathless, outside Netta's front door, and paused before I rang the bell.

Everything was exactly the same. There was her card in a tiny brass frame screwed to the panel of the door. There was the long scratch on the paint-work which I had made when slightly drunk with the latchkey. There was the thick wool mat before the door. I found my heart was beating a shade quicker, and my hands were a little damp. It seemed to me all of a sudden that Netta had become important to me: I'd been away too long.

I punched the bell, waited, heard nothing, punched the bell again.

No one answered the door. I continued to wait, wondering if Netta was in her bath. I gave her a few more seconds, punched the bell again.

"There's no one there," a voice said from behind me.

I turned, looked down the short flight of stairs. A man was standing in the doorway of the lower flat, looking up at me. He was a big strapping fellow around thirty, broad and well-built but far from muscular. With a frame like a hammer-thrower, he was yet soft, just this side of fat. He stood looking up at me with a half-smile on his face, and the impression he gave me was that of an enormous sleepy tom-cat, indifferent, self-sufficient, pleased with himself. The waning sunlight coming through the grimy window caught the gold in his mouth, making his teeth come alive.

"Hello, baby," he said. "You one of her boy friends?" He had a faint lisp, and his corn-coloured hair was cut close. He was wearing a yellow and black silk dressing-gown, fastened at his throat; his pyjama legs were electric blue, his sandals scarlet. He was quite a picture.

"Go jump into a lake," I said. "Jump into two if one won't hold you," and I turned back to Netta's door.

The man giggled. It was an unpleasant hissing sound and for no reason at all it set my nerves jumping.

"There's no one there, baby," he repeated, then added in an undertone, "she's dead."

I stopped ringing the bell, turned, looked at him. He raised his eyebrows, and his head waggled from side to side ever so slightly.

"Did you hear?" he asked, and smiled as if he were privately amused at some secret joke of his own.

"Dead?" I repeated, moving away from the door.

"That's right, baby," he said, leaning against the doorpost, giving me an arch look. "She died yesterday. You can still smell the gas if you sniff hard enough." He touched his throat, flinched. "I had a bad day with it yesterday."

I walked down the stairs, stood in front of him. He was an inch taller than I and a lot broader, but I knew he hadn't any iron in his bones.

"Calm down, Fatso," I said, "and give it to me straight. What gas?

What are you raving about?"

"Come inside, baby," he said, smirking. "I'll tell you about it."

Before I could refuse, he had sauntered into a large room which stank of stale scent and was full of old, dusty furniture.

He dropped into a big easy chair. As his great body dented the cushions a fine cloud of dust arose.

"Excuse the hovel," he said, looking around the room with an expression of disgust on his face. "Mrs. Crockett's a slut. She never cleans the place and I can't be expected to do it, can I, baby? Life's too short to waste time cleaning when one has my abilities."

"Never mind the Oscar Wilde act," I said impatiently. "Are you telling me Netta Scott's dead?"

He nodded, smiled up at me. "Sad, isn't it? Such a delightful girl; beautiful, lovely little body; so full of vigour — now, just meal for the worms." He sighed. "Death is a great leveller, isn't it?"

"How did it happen?" I asked, wanting to take him by his fat throat and shake the daylights out of him.

"By her own hand," he said mournfully. "Shocking business. Police rushing up and down stairs . . . the ambulance . . . doctors . . . Mrs. Crockett screaming . . . that fat bitch in the lower flat gloating . . . a crowd in the street, hoping to see the remains quite, quite ghastly. Then the smell of gas — couldn't get it out of the house all day. Shocking business, baby, really most, most shocking."

"You mean she gassed herself?" I asked, going cold.

"That's right, the poor lamb. The room was sealed with adhesive tape . . . roll upon roll of adhesive tape, and the gas oven going full blast. I'll never be able to buy adhesive tape again without thinking of her." The words were a vibrationless hum, intimate and secret-sounding. The perpetual smile bothered me too.

"I see," I said, turning away.

Well, that was that. I felt suddenly deflated, a little sick, infinitely sad.

I thought: If you had only waited twenty-four hours, Netta, we'd have faced whatever it was together, and we'd have licked it.

"Thank you," I said at the door.

"Don't thank me, baby," he said, heaving himself out of the chair and following me on to the landing. "It's nice to know I've rendered a little service, although a sad one. I can see you're suffering from shock, but you'll get over it. Plenty of hard work is the best healer. Doesn't Byron say, 'The busy have no time for tears?' Perhaps you don't admire Byron. Some people don't."

I stared at him, not seeing him, not listening to him. From out of the past, I heard Netta's voice saying: "So the fool killed himself. He hadn't the guts to take what was coming to him. Well, whatever I do, I'd be

ready to pay for it. I wouldn't take that way out - ever."

She had said that one night when we had read of a millionaire who had bulled when he should have beared and had blown out his brains. I remembered how Netta had looked when she had said that, and I felt a little cold breath of wind against my cheek.

There was something wrong here. I knew Netta would never have killed herself.

I pulled my hat farther down on my nose, felt in my pocket for a cigarette, offered the carton.

"Why did she do it?" I asked.

"I'm Julius Cole," the pixy said, drawing out a cigarette from the carton between a grubby forefinger and thumb. "Are you a friend of hers?"

I nodded. "I knew her a couple of years ago," I said, lighting his cigarette and then mine.

He smiled. "She would be interested in an American," he said as if to himself. "And, of course, with her figure and looks an American would be interested in her." He looked up, his eyes sleepy. "It would be interesting to know the exact number of girls in this country who were ravished by American service men during their stay here, wouldn't it? I make a point of collecting such statistics." He lifted his broad, limp shoulders. "Probably a waste of time," he added, wagging his head.

"How did it happen?" I said sharply.

"You mean, why did she do it?" he gently corrected me. Again he lifted his shoulders. The silk of his dressing-gown rustled. "It's a mystery, baby. No note . . . five pounds in her bag . . . food in the refrigerator . . . no love letters . . . no one knows." He raised his eyebrows, smiled. "Perhaps she was with child. "

I couldn't continue this conversation. Talking about Netta with him was like reading something written on a lavatory wall.

"Well, thanks," I said, and walked down the stairs.

"Don't mention it, baby," he said. "So sad for you: so disappointing." He went back into his room and closed the door.

chapter two

Mrs. Crockett was a thin little woman with bright, suspicious eyes and a thin, disapproving mouth.

I could see she didn't recognize me. She seemed to think I was a newspaper man after a story, and she peered at me from around the half-open door, ready to slam it in my face.

"What do you want?" she demanded in a reedy, querulous voice.

"I 'ave enough to do without answering a lot of silly questions, so be off with you."

"Don't you remember me, Mrs. Crockett?" I asked. "I'm Steve Harmas, one of Miss Scott's friends."

"One of 'er friends, are you?" she said. "Fancy men, that's wot I call 'em." She peered at me, then nodded her head. Her eyes showed her disapproval. "Yes, I seemed to 'ave seen you before. Well, you've 'eard what's 'appened to 'er, 'aven't you?"

I nodded. "Yes. I wanted to talk to you about her. Did she leave any debts? I'll settle anything she owed."

The disapproving look was replaced by one of greed and calculating shrewdness.

"She owed me a month's rent," she said promptly. "Never expected to get that either. Still, if you're paying 'er debts, may as well 'ave it. You'd better come in."

I followed her along a dark passage that smelt of cats and boiled cabbage, into a dark, dingy room crammed with bamboo furniture.

"So she owed money?" I asked, watching the woman.

"Well, no," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "She always paid up: I'll say that for her, but she only 'ad the flat on the strict understanding it'd be a month's notice or a month's rent."

"I see," I said. "Have you any idea why she did what she did?"

Mrs. Crockett stared at me, looked away. " 'ow should I know?" she asked, anger in her voice. "I didn't interfere with 'er. I knew nothing about 'er." Her thin lips set in a hard line. "She was no good. I should never 'ave 'ad 'er 'ere. Bringing disgrace to my 'ouse like this."

"When did it happen?"

"The night before last. Mr. Cole smelt gas and 'e called me. When I couldn't get no answer I guessed what she 'ad done — the little fool!" The hard eyes glittered. "Fair upset me it did. Mr. Cole sent for the police."

"Did you see her?"

Mrs. Crockett started back "Who? Me? Think I want to ave 'er 'aunting my dreams?-Not likely. Mr. Cole identified ' er for the police.

Ever so considerate 'e is. Besides, 'e knew 'er as well, if not better than wot I did . . . always popping in and out of 'is room whenever 'e 'ears anything."

"All right," I said, taking out my wallet. "Have you a key to her flat."

"Suppose I 'ave?" she said suspiciously. "What's it to you?"

"I'd like to borrow it," I returned, counting pound notes on to the table. Her eyes followed every movement. "Shall we say twenty-five pounds? Ten pounds for the key?"

"What's the idea?" She was breathing quickly, her eyes overbright.

"Only that I'd like to look around her room. I suppose it's as it was . . . nothing's been touched?"

"Oh, no, the police told me to leave it alone. They're trying to trace her relatives. Fat chance of finding anyone who'd own 'er, I say. I can't imagine what'll 'appen to 'er things. Anyway, I want 'em out. I want to let the flat."

"Has she any relatives?"

"No one knows anything about 'er," Mrs. Crockett said with a sniff. "Maybe the police'll find out something, and it won't be any good, you mark my words."

"May I have the key, please?" I said, pushing the little heap of money towards her.

She shook her head doubtfully. "The police wouldn't like it," she said, looked away.

"I'm offering you ten pounds to sooth your conscience," I reminded her. "Take it or leave it."

She opened the drawer of the dresser, took out a key, laid it on the table.

"It's people with too much money what gets honest folk into trouble," she said.

"I'll put that in my autograph book," I said, a little sick of her, picked up the key, pushed the notes farther in her direction.

She snatched up the money, rammed it into her apron pocket.

"Don't keep that key too long," she said, "and don't you take anything from the flat."

I nodded, went out.

I walked up the stairs, paused on the first floor to read the name on the 'card screwed to the panel of the door: Madge Kennitt. I remembered that Julius Cole had said: "the fat bitch in the lower flat, gloating." I nodded to myself, walked on up to Netta's flat. I fitted the key in the door, turned the handle, pushed gently. The door swung open. I entered Netta's sitting room. As I turned to close the door, I saw Julius Cole watching me from the half-open door of his flat. He raised his eyebrows, waggled his head. I pretended I hadn't seen him, closed Netta's door, shot the bolt.

There was a faint, persistent smell of gas in the flat although the windows were open. I looked around the room, feeling sad and a little spooked.

The room hadn't changed much since last I was in it. Some of the furniture had been shifted around, but there were no new pieces. The pictures were the same: all rather risque prints taken from American and French magazines.

I had once asked Netta why she had such pictures on her walls.

"The boys like them," she had explained. "They take their minds off me. People who bore me are shocked by them and don't come again, so they have their uses, you see."

On the mantelpiece was her collection of china animals. She had about thirty of them. I had given her several. I went over to see if mine were still there. They were. I picked up a charming reproduction of Disney's Bambi, turned it over. I remembered how pleased Netta had been with it. She said it was the best of her collection. I think it was.

I put the ornament down, wandered around the room my hands in my pockets. I was only beginning to realize that Netta was dead, that I wouldn't see her again.

I didn't think I would feel bad about it, but I did. Her death worried me too. I couldn't believe that she had committed suicide.

She just wasn't the type to quit. Before the war I had been a crime reporter. I'd visited hundreds of rooms in which suicides had met their end. There had been an atmosphere in those rooms which this room lacked. I don't know quite what it was, but somehow I couldn't believe a suicide had happened here.

I went over to the light oak writing-desk, opened it, glanced inside. It was empty except for a bottle of ink and a couple of pencils. I looked at the pigeon-holes, remembered them as they had been when Netta and I had been going around together, crammed with letters, bills, papers. Now there was nothing.

I glanced over at the fireplace expecting to see ashes of burned paper. But the fireplace was empty. I thought this odd, pushed my hat to the back of my head, frowned down at the desk. Yes, odd.

A faint scratching at the front door made me start. I listened. The scratching continued.

"Let me in, baby," Julius Cole whispered through the panels. "I want to see, too."

I grimaced, tip-toed across the room, into the kitchen. The small-gas oven door was ajar. There was an orange-coloured cushion lying in the far corner of the room. I supposed she had used it when she put her head in the oven. I didn't like thinking about it, so I went from the kitchen into her bedroom.

It was a small, bright room. The big double divan took up most of the space. There was a fitted wardrobe near the bed, a small dressing-table by the window. The room was decorated in green and daffodil yellow. There were no pictures, no ornaments.

I closed the door, stood looking down at the bed. It had memories for me, and it was several minutes before I walked to the dressing-table and looked at the amazing assortment of bottles, beauty creams, grease-paints that were scattered on the powder-covered glass top. I pulled open the drawers. They were full of the usual junk a girl collects: handkerchiefs, silk scarves, leather belts, gloves, cheap jewellery. I stirred with my forefinger the necklaces, bangles, rings in the cardboard box. It was all junk, and then I remembered the diamond bracelet and the diamond scarf-pin of which she had been so proud. I had given her the bracelet; some guy-she never told me who-had given her the pin. I looked through the drawers, but I couldn't see them. I wondered where they had got to, if the police had taken them for safe custody.

Then I went to the wardrobe, opened it. A subtle smell of lilac drifted out of the wardrobe when I opened the door: her favourite perfume. I was struck by the emptiness in the wardrobe. There were only two evening dresses, a coat and skirt and a frock. At one time the cupboard was crammed with clothes.

There was a flame-coloured dress which I remembered. It was the dress she wore the night we first decided to sleep together. The kind of dress a sentimental guy like me wouldn't forget. I reached for it, took it off the hanger, and as I pulled it out I realized that something heavy was hung up inside the dress.

My fingers traced around the shape of the thing: it was a gun. I opened the dress, found a Luger pistol hanging by its trigger guard from a small hook sewn inside the dress.

I sat on the bed, holding the dress in one hand and the Luger in the other. I was startled. It was the last thing I should have expected to find in Netta's flat.

There were two obvious things to notice about the gun. It had a deep scratch along its barrel, and on the butt was a scar as if something had been filed off the metal; probably the name of the owner. I sniffed at the gun, had another shock. It had been fired, although not recently. The smell of burned powder was faint, but distinct. I laid the gun on the bed, scratched my head, brooded for a few minutes, then got up, went back to the wardrobe again. I opened the two drawers in which Netta used to keep her silk stockings and undies. Silk stockings had been one of Netta's passions. During the time I had known her I had never seen her wear anything but real silk hose. She had laid in a stock just before the war, and a number of

American service men, and myself for that matter, had kept her stock up. I turned over the garments in the drawers, but I couldn't find any silk stockings.

I stubbed out my cigarette, frowned, wondered if Mrs. Crockett had been up here and had taken them, or if the police had been tempted. Silk stockings were almost unobtainable, and the temptation was easy to understand. There should have been at least a dozen pairs. When I last saw her-two years ago-she had thirty-six pairs. I know, because one night, when she had asked me to get her some, I had turned her drawer out and counted them to prove to her she didn't need any more. Yes, she should have at least a dozen pairs, if not more. Where were they?

I decided to search her flat. I had been trained during my years as a crime reporter to take a house to pieces so that it wouldn't show. It would be a long, dull job, but somehow I felt it would pay dividends.

I went through each room carefully and systematically. I left nothing to chance, even unwinding the blinds, feeling along the pelmets, taking up the carpets and sounding the floors.

In the bedroom by the fireplace I found a small recess in the floor, under a loose board. It was obvious that something had been kept there, but it was no longer there. In the bathroom, wrapped around the toilet roll I found eight five-pound notes. In the sitting room between a picture of one of Varga's lovelies and the back of the frame were eight more five-pound notes. At the bottom of a jar of cold cream I found a diamond ring. It looked a good diamond, and the setting was platinum. I hadn't seen it before. It was an odd hiding place, but then so were the hiding places of the five-pound notes.

I went into the kitchen, and after a painstaking search found at the bottom of the flour bin, buried under the flour, a foolscap envelope. I drew it out, dusted off the flour and read the address on the envelope, written in Netta's big, untidy hand:

Miss Anne Scott,

Beverley,

Could this be a sister? I wondered, feeling the bulky envelope between my fingers. It seemed full of papers, and was heavy.

The whole business seemed to me odd. I was uneasy, suspicious. I didn't know what to make of it all.

I satisfied myself that there was nothing of further interest in the kitchen, went back to the sitting room.

I laid out on the table all the things I had found. There was the Luger pistol, the diamond ring, the sixteen five-pound notes, and the letter addressed to Anne Scott.

Why should a girl commit suicide when she possessed eighty pounds and a diamond ring? I asked myself. What other trouble apart

from money could have made Netta do away with herself? I couldn't imagine anything bad enough. In fact, I was now as sure as I could be that she hadn't committed suicide. Murder? Well, if it wasn't suicide, it had to be murder. It couldn't have been an accident. Accidents didn't happen quite like that.

I lit another cigarette, brooded. I'd have to discuss this with the police. I remembered Inspector Corridan of the Yard. He and I had been friendly when last I was in London. He had taken me around to the various haunts of petty criminals, and the material I had collected with his help had made a good article for the Saturday Evening Post.

Corridan was just the man to consult and I immediately reached for the telephone.

After a delay, Corridan came on the line.

I reminded him who I was, and he remembered me.

"Glad to hear from you again, Harmas," he said. "You're lucky to have caught me. I was just going home."

"Are you in a hurry?" I asked, glancing at my wrist watch.

It was nearly nine o'clock.

"Well, I want to get home. Is it anything urgent?"

"Interesting rather than urgent," I said. "I want your advice, and perhaps help. It's to do with a girl named Netta Scott who committed suicide the night before last."

"Who did you say?" he asked sharply.

"The girl's name is Netta Scott. She used to be an old friend of mine. Frankly, Corridan, I'm not satisfied that she did kill herself."

There was a pause, then he said, "Well, I have nothing special to do tonight. What do you suggest?"

"Suppose you meet me in half an hour at the Savoy?" I said. "If you'd make inquiries about the girl, it might simplify things. Any details may be useful." I gave him Netta's address, and he promised to have the information, and hung up. That was one of the things I liked about Corridan. He was never surprised at anything, never asked a lot of unnecessary questions, and was always willing to be helpful no matter how busy he was or how late the hour.

I put the gun, envelope, ring and money in my various pockets.

Satisfied I hadn't missed anything, I turned off the light, opened the front door, stepped on to the landing.

Julius Cole had brought a chair into his little hall and was sitting there smoking, with the front door open, waiting for me.

"Why didn't you let me in, baby?" he asked, smiling his secret smile. "You had no right to be in there yourself."

"Go bowl a hoop," I said, went on down the stairs.

"Don't run away, baby," he said, sliding off his chair and coming to the head of the stairs. "What's it like in there?" He sniggered. "Did she

have pretty things? I suppose you've been through all her clothes. I wish I'd been there."

I kept on, without looking back.

Mrs. Crockett answered my rap on her door.

"You've been up there long enough," she snapped, taking the key I handed to her. "You 'aven't taken anything, 'ave you? Most particular the police were about leaving everything as it was."

I shook my head. "It's all right," I said. "Has anyone been in there since she died . . . I mean anyone except the police? Mr. Cole for instance?"

She shook her head. "No one, but you, and I'm sure I didn't ought to 'ave . . ."

"There were some silk stockings . . . they don't seem to be there," I interrupted. "Do you know anything about them?"

"What should I want with silk stockings?" she snapped. "Course I don't!"

I thanked her, made noncommittal noises, walked up the narrow stairs to the front door.

In the street I paused for a moment to look at the house. A light burned in Julius Cole's flat: the rest of the house was in darkness. I wondered about Madge Kennitt, decided she didn't fit in the picture; anyway, not for the time being, began to walk in the direction of Cromwell Road, fifty yards or so ahead of me.

The street was lit by only three lamps, one at the top, the other at the bottom and the third halfway between the other two. It was dark, and there were deep shadows, otherwise I shouldn't have been so easily surprised.

I heard a patter of feet behind me, felt a sudden premonition of danger, ducked, jumped aside.

Something very hard hit my shoulder, brought me to my knees. I flung up my arm, staggered upright and again jumped back. I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure of a man holding what seemed to me to be a tyre lever above his head. He slashed wildly at me. I heard the lever whistle past my face, stepped in close, and belted the guy in the ribs with everything I had. He dropped the tyre lever, reeled back, his breath coming out of him like a punctured balloon.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?" I demanded, crowding him.

I could see him now. He was a little runt, young, slim, underfed. I couldn't see much of his face except that he was pasty. His clothes were shoddy, and his hat like a sponge full of grease.

Before I could collar him, he darted out of my reach and went down the street like a streak of lightning.

I stood looking after him, listening to his light footfalls. My shoulder

ached and I was a little scared.

"For crying out loud," I muttered to myself, looked uneasily up and down the street, ran hurriedly towards the lights of Cromwell Road.

chapter three

I had been in my room only five minutes when the inquiry desk called to say Inspector Corridan was asking for me.

"Tell him to come up, please," I said, pressed the bell for the floor waiter.

Corridan and the floor waiter arrived together.

Corridan was a big, beefy fellow, thirty-five, dark with small blue eyes that had a nasty habit of appearing to look right through you.

Even to his friends he was somewhat dour, seldom smiled, never laughed.

He shook hands warmly enough, looked round the room approvingly.

"They make you comfortable here I must say," he remarked, shot a quick glance at the waiter, went on, "I hope you are going to buy me a drink?"

"Sure, and I thought we might have dinner up here," I said.

"Nothing's too good for the London police."

The floor waiter produced a menu and we chose cold consommé, chicken vol au vent, ice-cream. I ordered two double whiskies and a carafe of Algerian wine.

"You newspaper men know how to live," Corridan sighed, sinking into the only armchair. "Often thought it might've been better for me to have gone in for something less exacting and more profitable than police work."

I grunted. "You should grumble," I said, sitting on the bed. "I bet you are up to your ears in graft, with half the criminals in London paying you hush-money."

His mouth tightened. "Your sense of humour is as warped as your morals," he returned, and I could see he wasn't amused.

"Okay, let's skip our morals," I said, grinning. "I'm damned glad you could come."

"Was this Netta Scott a friend of yours?" he asked, wandering to the window. He went on before I could reply. "I see the Thames enough from the Yard, but from this angle and in this light it's really attractive, don't you think?"

"Never mind about the Thames," I said shortly. "You're not being wined and dined because I want to hear about the sights of London."

He gave me a sharp look. "You sound worried. Anything wrong?"

I nodded. "There could be . . ." I began when the floor waiter returned with our drinks.

When he had gone, I went on, "About Netta Scott. She was a friend

of mine. I met her in '42, and we kicked around together for a couple of years. It was a shock to learn she'd committed suicide."

He drank some whisky, cocked his head approvingly. "Good whisky this," he said. "But obviously you don't want to talk about whisky. I've read the doctor's report. The girl wasn't risking a mistake. She took a stiff dose of laudanum before she gassed herself. But it's a straightforward case . . . obviously suicide. The Kensington Division handled it. They had a call at seven o'clock yesterday morning from a man named Julius Cole who lives in the same house. They found the girl with her head in the gas oven and the kitchen full of gas. The windows had been sealed with adhesive tape, but riot the door which fitted well. She had been dead about six hours. At a rough guess she killed herself around one o'clock in the morning. There were no marks of violence on the body, and no evidence that it wasn't anything but suicide. She was taken to the local mortuary, having been officially identified by this Cole chap who claimed to know her well by sight. We are now trying to get in touch with her relatives without any success at the moment."

I finished my whisky, felt better for it.

"No question of foul play?" I asked.

His eyes probed me. "No. Why should there be?"

"Your people are quite happy about that?"

"They're never happy about anything, but they're quite satisfied that there's no question of foul play. Suicide happens every day. It may interest you to know an individual's occupation tends to influence the likelihood of suicide," Corridan went on, closing his eyes and settling farther into his chair. "Occupations involving strain, responsibility or very late hours provide the greatest numbers of suicides. Chemists, doctors, solicitors, publicans, night club workers, butchers and soldiers are to be found high up in the list of occupations, whilst gardeners, fishermen, clergymen, school teachers and civil servants are at the foot of the list."

I groaned. "I guess I stuck my neck out that time," I said. "Okay, okay, don't let's have any more of that. Then I take it because night club workers rank high on the list of likely suicides, Netta killed herself, is that it?"

He nodded. "Something like that. Anyway, it helps us to make up our minds. If she were a school teacher, for instance, we might look at the business more closely. See what I mean?"

"And you think a girl like Netta would choose a gas oven? You don't think she'd jump out of a window or use poison?"

"Women hesitate to make a mess of themselves even in death," Corridan returned, lifting his shoulders. "Especially girls as pretty as Netta. Jumping out of windows can be very messy . . . I've seen some.

Owing to a little thing called the Dangerous Drugs Act suicides by poison are on the decrease. I believe over six hundred women committed suicide by coal-gas last year. I'll get you the exact figures if you're interested."

"That's good enough for me," I said. "And why do you think she killed herself?"

Corridan finished his whisky, put the glass on the table, shrugged.

"It's interesting to consider the reasons which impel individual conduct," he said, crossing his legs and sinking lower in his chair. "A knowledge of the causes of suicide is also of help in determining the question of accident, suicide or murder. The four main reasons why people commit suicide are, in order of their importance, mental conditions, drink, financial worries and love. There are other causes, of course, but these are the four important ones. As far as we know the girl didn't owe money, she didn't drink to excess, and she appeared mentally normal from what Cole and the landlady tell us. Therefore it's reasonable to suppose she had an unhappy love affair."

"The way you coppers get everything down to a rule of thumb kills me," I said, as the waiter wheeled in a table ladened with good things to eat. "Come on, let's get at it."

"Another of those excellent whiskies mightn't be a bad idea," Corridan said, getting to his feet and pulling up a straight-backed chair to the table.

"Make it two," I said to the waiter, "and then leave us to look after ourselves."

We sat down and began on the cold consommé.

"What makes you think she wasn't murdered?" I asked casually.

He shook his head. "What a chap you are," he said. "I've just told you. . ." He glanced up sharply, frowned. "But perhaps you know more about this than I do. Perhaps I'd better hear what you have to say before I commit myself too deeply." His lips curled slightly at the corners which was his idea of a smile. "Do you think she was murdered?"

"I'm willing to bet five hundred pounds that she was," I said.

His eyebrows shot up. "And you have five hundred pounds?"

"I have. Like to take me on?"

He shook his head. "I never bet with Yanks; they're far too smart."

He pushed his plate away, dabbed his thin lips with his napkin. "Hmm, now I wonder what makes you so sure?"

"I've been to her flat and had a look around," I said. "I found some interesting items which I'll show you in a moment. First tell me, did any of your men take anything from the flat?"

"No. Is there anything missing?"

"A number of pairs of silk stockings, most of her clothes, and a

diamond bracelet and scarf-pin."

"Valuable?"

"The bracelet cost two hundred pounds three years ago. It'll be worth double that now. I don't know about the pin."

"How do you know they're missing? Couldn't she have sold t hem?"

I hadn't thought of that, and said so. "All the same I don't think she did. She was fond of those pieces and nothing would persuade her to get rid of her stockings. No, I don't believe she did sell the stuff."

Corridan eyed me. "Now you're being obstinate," he said quietly.

"I should say it was most likely. She may have been pressed for money at one time."

The waiter interrupted us with the whiskies. We paused before we started on the vol au vent, finished the whiskies while we talked.

"But she wasn't the type to kill herself," I said. "I remember once she said she'd never take that way out of trouble. If you'd have heard her you'd know she wasn't the type."

"How long ago was that?"

"Two years. Oh, I know you'll say people change, but I'm still sure she wasn't the type."

"What else?" The blue eyes probed, the thin mouth came near to a smile again. "Ignoring the jewellery, the stockings and her type, what else have you got?"

"I haven't started yet," I said, "but it'll keep until we've fed. You don't know anything about the girl?"

"She hasn't a record if that's what you mean," he returned, contentedly chewing his food. "She worked at the Blue Club as a dance hostess and she's been fined once or twice for car offences, otherwise we don't know anything about her."

"And the Blue Club? I hear it's taken a dive since I knew it."

"Most of these clubs that catered for Americans have deteriorated since the Americans have gone home. The Blue Club is on our suspect list, but Bradley is a little too smart for us at the moment. We believe the place is a gambling den, and there's drinking out of hours. I'm sure the food is Black Market, but we've never been able to get any of our men in there, and a raid has always flopped. The Chief thinks one of our men tips Bradley off when a raid is going to be made. Anyway, he's always one jump ahead of us, although he can't last much longer."

By now we had finished the meal, and Corridan went back to the armchair. I ordered brandy and cigars, saw he was settled comfortably.

"Well, now perhaps I can convince you," I said, produced the Luger and handed it to him.

He sat for a long moment staring at it, his face expressionless, then he glanced up, his eves cold.

"Where did this come from?" he asked.

I told him.

He examined the Luger thoughtfully, shook his head, relaxed again.

"If you knew the number of women who have these damn things you wouldn't think so much of it," he said. "Nearly every American soldier brought one back from Germany, and gave it to his girlfriend. What makes you so het up about it?"

"I'm not het up about it," I said, "but it's odd she should have kept it hidden in a dress like that, isn't it?" I suddenly wondered if I was making a fool of myself.

"Well, you can get into trouble having one of these things she might have hidden it with that in mind," Corridan returned, stretching out his long legs and sniffing at his brandy. "Nothing more concrete?"

I told him about the sixteen five-pound notes, and handed them and the letter to Anne Scott over to him. I also gave him the diamond ring.

"You certainly searched the place pretty thoroughly," he said, cocking an eye at me. "I don't know if you had any right in there . . . had you?"

"Maybe not," I returned, chewing my cigar, "but this business worries me, Corridan. I feel there's something wrong somewhere." I went on to tell him about the man who had attacked me.

He showed some interest at last.

"Did you see him?"

"It was damned dark, and I was startled. All right," I went on when he half smiled. "I was scared pink. So would you've been if it had happened to you. The guy sprang out at me with what looked like a tyre lever, and he had a damned good shot at bashing my brains in. I couldn't see much of him, but he seemed young, slight, and could run like hell. I think I'd know him again if I saw him."

"What do you think he was after?"

"The gun perhaps," I said, "that's why I suggest you have it checked. You see there's a scratch on the barrel and it looks as if at one time a name was engraved on the butt. I believe the gun might tell us something."

"You've been reading too many detective stories," he grunted.

"Still, there's no harm checking the gun." He sniffed at it. "Been fired, I'd say a month or so ago. Smells of lilac, too."

"Her favourite perfume," I told him. "Well, that's my story. I hoped you'd be more impressed, but I should have known better. The trouble with you is you've no imagination."

He stroked his long fleshy nose. "Maybe I haven't, but I've a lot of horse sense, and I still think she committed suicide." He picked up the envelope, tapped it on his finger-nails. "Shall we see what's in here?"

"Can we?"

"The police can do anything," he said with a wink. He took out a pencil, slid it under the flap of the envelope, rolled it gently backwards and forwards. After a little persuasion the flap lifted.

"Easy once you know how," he said, looking at me with his half-hearted smile. "You have to have the right touch, of course."

"I'll keep my mail out of your reach," I said. "Well, what's inside?"

He glanced into the envelope, whistled. With finger and thumb he hooked out what seemed a stack of over-printed paper.

"Bearer bonds," he said.

I leaned forward. "Seems a lot of them," I said, gaping.

His fingers flicked through them. "Five thousand pounds worth," he said. "Now I wonder where these came from?" He glanced inside the envelope. "No note. Hmm, this is a little odd I must say."

I laughed at him. "Now you're starting. The whole thing's odd to me. Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"I think I'll take a trip to Lakeham and see Miss Scott. I'd like to know where these bonds came from. If she can't tell me, I'll have to check them. That may be a longish job; still, I want to know."

"Could I come with you to Lakeham?" I asked. "I'll play Watson to your Holmes. Besides, I'd like to meet the sister. Maybe she doesn't know Netta's dead. I think I should be there when the news is broken."

"By all means come," he said, getting to his feet. "Shall we say tomorrow morning? We can go down by car."

"Swell. But don't think you're through yet," I said. "There's one more thing I want you to do. Where can I see Netta? I want to see her before she's buried."

"A bit morbid, aren't you?" he shot at me. "What good can that do you?"

"I'm funny that way," I said, stubbing out my cigar. "Suppose you come along too? I want you to see her if only to be in a better position to judge when the lid comes off this business, as I'm sure it will. I have a hunch we're on to something that's going to be big, and you'll thank me in the long run for putting you wise."

"I've never met such a chap," Corridan muttered, went over to the telephone, called the Yard.

I stood by while he ordered a police car to pick us up outside the Savoy.

"Come along," he said, "if it hadn't been such a damn good dinner I'd have told you to have gone to blazes, but I suppose I'll have to pay for my entertainment. Who knows, you may invite me again."

"Maybe I will at that," I said, following him along the corridor to the elevator.

It took us under a quarter of an hour to reach the mortuary, and the officer in charge, startled to have a visit from Corridan, came out to

greet us.

"Netta Scott," Corridan said abruptly. He was always short with his inferiors in rank. "You have her here. We want to see her."

The constable, a young, red-faced country-looking fellow, shook his head. "Not now, sir," he said. "She was here, but she was taken to the Hammersmith mortuary an hour ago."

Corridan frowned. "Oh? On whose orders?"

"I don't know, sir," the constable replied, looked blank.

"You don't know?" Corridan barked, "But surely you had an official order before you let them take the body?"

The constable changed colour. "Well, no, sir," he said. "I'm new here. I - I didn't know an order was necessary in this case. The driver of the ambulance said there'd been a mistake, and the remains should 'ave gone to Hammersmith. I let him take the body."

Corridan, his face dark with fury, pushed past the constable, went into the office, slammed the door.

The constable stared after him, scratched his head. "Now I wonder what's up," he said, looking at me. "Do you think I did wrong, sir?"

I shrugged. "Search me," I said, feeling uneasy. "But you'll know before long."

After several minutes, Corridan came out of the office, walked past the constable, jerked his head at me. At the door he paused, looked back.

"You'll hear a lot more about this, my man, before very long," he snapped at the constable, walked to the police car.

I got in beside him, and as we drove off, I said, "Well, do we go to Hammersmith?"

"Hammersmith didn't send for the body," Corridan growled.

"Anyone but a fool would have known it was a plant. A couple of hours back an ambulance was reported stolen. Someone-believe it or not-has kidnapped Netta Scott's body. It's fantastic! Why, for God's sake?" and he thumped the hack of the driver's seat with his clenched fist.

chapter four

The next morning, I awoke with a start. The telephone was ringing, and sitting up in bed, I grabbed the receiver, stifling a yawn as I did so. I peered at my bedside clock and saw it was ten minutes past eight, grunted, "Who is it?"

"Inspector Corridan asking for you," the porter said.

"All right, send him up," I returned, snatched up my dressing-gown and rushed into the bathroom for a hasty shower.

I had slept badly, and was still feeling a little piqued at the abrupt way Corridan had returned me to the Savoy. He had said, "Sorry, Harmas, but this is police business now. Can't take you along with me," and that was that. Of course, he was rattled, and I realized that he had something to get rattled about, but I thought he had a nerve to ditch me after I'd given him so much data to work on; but Corridan was like that. When he started on a job, he worked alone.

I was just coming out of the bathroom when I heard a rap on my door. I opened it; Corridan entered. He looked tired, was unshaven.

"Have you only just got up?" he snapped, tossing his hat on a chair. "I haven't even been to bed."

"You don't expect me to sob over that item of news, do you?" I returned. "After the way you dropped me last night?"

He looked more surly than ever, sat down. "Get me some coffee, there's a good fellow, and don't grouse," he said, "I've had a hell of a night."

I picked up the telephone, called the floor waiter, ordered coffee.

"You have only yourself to blame," I said. "If you'd have kept me with you, I'd have halved your work."

"I'm seeing the Chief in half an hour's time, and I thought I'd look in on my way to tell you the news," Corridan said. "First the gun. It belonged to a fellow named Peter Utterly, a lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He's been repatriated, but we persuaded the authorities on the other side to get a statement from him. Apparently he knew Netta Scott, gave her the Luger as a souvenir. You'll remember I told you that was the probable explanation of the gun."

"You've been quick," I said, a little disappointed that the explanation should be so commonplace.

"Oh, we work fast when necessary," Corridan said, looked dour.

"So much for the gun. We traced the ambulance. It was found on Hampstead Heath, but the body is still missing. We have a description of the driver, but it could fit any young fellow. Where the body's got to defeats me, and why it was stolen defeats me still more."

"There must be an explanation," I said, waving to the waiter who had just entered to put the coffee on the table. "Unless it was a practical joke."

Corridan shrugged. "We'll get to the bottom of it," he said, glanced at his watch. "Let's have that coffee. I have to be off in a moment."

While I was pouring the coffee, he went on, "I've had the bonds checked. They are forgeries. That's always something to worry about. Can you suggest why this girl should be hiding forged bonds in her flat?"

"Not unless someone gave them to her, and she thought they were genuine," I said, handing him the cup of coffee. "Of course, I've been out of touch with Netta for a long time now. She may have got into bad company, but I doubt it."

He sipped the coffee, grunted. "I think that's likely," he said. "The diamond ring you found has a history. It's part of a considerable amount of jewellery stolen a few weeks ago. The owner of the jewellery, Hervey Allenby, identified the ring late last night. Our people have been waiting for the stuff to come into the market. This ring is the first sign of it. How do you think she got hold of it?"

I shook my head, perplexed. "Maybe someone gave it to her," I said.

"Then why should she hide it at the bottom of a jar of cold cream?" Corridan returned, finishing his coffee. "Odd place to keep a ring unless you have a guilty conscience, isn't it?"

I said it was.

"Well, it'll sort itself out," Corridan went on. "I still don't think we have any grounds to suppose the girl was murdered, Harmas. After all that's the thing that was worrying you. You can leave this other business to me."

"So you're going to play copper, are you?" I said. "Well, I think someone knocked her off. If you'll take the trouble to use that hat rack you call a head, I'll explain in two minutes why it wasn't suicide."

He eyed me coldly, moved to the door.

"I'm afraid I can't spare the time, Harmas," he said. "I have a lot to do, and newspaper men's theories scarcely interest me. Sorry, but I suggest you leave this to those competent to handle it."

"There must be times when Mrs. Corridan is very proud of you," I said sarcastically. "This is one of them, I should think."

"I'm single," he said. "Sorry to disappoint you. I must be getting along." He paused at the door. "I'm afraid there can be no question of you coming with me to see this Anne Scott. This is official business now. We can't have Yankee newspaper men barging in on our preserves."

I nodded. "Okay," I said. "If that's the way you feel, think no more about it."

"I won't," he said, with a sour smile, quietly left the room.

For a moment or so I was too mad to think clearly, then I calmed down, had to grin. If Corridan thought he could keep me out of this business he was crazy.

I bundled into my clothes, grabbed the telephone and asked Inquiries how I could hire a car. They said they'd have one ready for me in twenty minutes after I'd explained I could get petrol on my Press card. I smoked two cigarettes, did a little thinking, then went downstairs.

They had found me a Buick. I was too scared to ask them how much it would cost, took the hall porter aside and inquired my way to Lakeham. He said that it was a few miles from Horsham, and suggested I should leave London via Putney Bridge and the Kingston By-pass. The rest of the run, he told me, would be simple as Horsham was well signposted.

In spite of its rather obvious age, the Buick ran well, and I reached the Fulham Road in less than a quarter of an hour and without having to ask the way. At this time of the morning, the traffic was coming into London, and I had practically a clear road ahead of me.

As I passed the Stamford Bridge football ground, one of the landmarks described by the hall porter, I noticed in the driving mirror a battered Standard car which I was fairly certain I'd seen behind me at Knightsbridge. I thought nothing of it until I reached Putney Bridge when I spotted it again. Being still a little jittery from the attack of last night, I began to wonder if I was being tailed.

I tried to catch sight of the driver, but the car was equipped with a blue anti-dazzle windscreen, and I could only make out the silhouette of a man's head.

I drove up Putney High Street, stopped at the traffic lights as they turned red. The Standard parked behind me.

I decided I would have to make certain that this man in the battered Standard was following me. If he was, I'd have to shake him. I wondered if Corridan had set one of his cops on to tailing me, decided it wasn't likely.

I was glad I had the Buick because it was obviously more powerful than the Standard which looked to me to be only a fourteen horsepower job against my thirty-one. As soon as the traffic lights changed to yellow, I shoved down the accelerator pedal, made a racing get-away. I roared up the hill leading from Putney, changed into top, missing second, and belted forward with the speedometer swinging dangerously near eighty miles an hour.

I saw people staring after me, but as no policeman hove into sight, I couldn't care less. I let the Buick have all the petrol it could take until I reached the top of the hill. Then I eased off the throttle, looked

rather contentedly into the mirror, had the shock of my life.

The Standard was about twenty feet from my tail.

I was still uncertain that I was being tailed. It might be that the guy had decided to show me I wasn't the only one with a fast car. I now had a healthy respect for the battered Standard, whose shabby body obviously concealed a first-class engine, tuned for speed.

I kept on; so did the Standard. When I reached the beginning of the By-pass, and he was still a hundred yards or so behind me, I decided to be foxy.

I flapped my hand out of the window, pulled up by the side of the road, watched the Standard shoot past me. As it went by I spotted the driver. He looked a youth. He was dark, a greasy slouch hat was pulled down low, but I saw enough of his face to recognize him. He was the runt who'd tried to make a batter out of my brains the previous night.

Now feeling certain he had been tailing me, I watched the Standard go on, and I reached for a cigarette. I guessed he would be pretty mad by now, wondering what he could do. He couldn't very well stop — couldn't he? I had to grin. A couple of hundred yards farther up the road, he pulled up.

That settled it. I was being tailed, and I took out a pencil from my pocket and scribbled the licence number of the car on the back of an envelope.

Now I had to shake him. I didn't hesitate. I owed him something for giving me a scare last night. I started the Buick, drove up to the Standard, braked sharply and was out of the car before the runt knew what was happening.

"Hello, pal," I said, smiling at him. "A little bird tells me you're following me. I don't like it." While I was speaking I took my penknife out, opened the blade. "Sorry to give you a little work, sonny," I went on, "but it'll do you a world of good."

He just sat glowering at me, his lips drawn off his yellow teeth. He looked like an infuriated ferret.

I bent down, stuck my penknife into one of his tyres. The air hissed out; the tyre went flat.

"These tyres aren't what they were, are they, son?" I asked, folding the blade down, putting the knife in my pocket. "I'll leave you to change the wheel. I have an appointment right now."

He called me a word which in normal times would have annoyed me, but I felt he had some justification.

"If you'd like to collect a tyre lever, we'll have another little joust," I said amiably.

He repeated the word, so I left him.

He was still sitting there as I drove past, and he was still sitting

there when I reached the bend in the road some six hundred yards farther on. I guessed he was a sore pup all right.

I reached Horsham in half an hour and I was sure now that I wasn't being followed. The traffic was negligible, and for miles I drove with nothing behind me.

From Horsham I took the Worthing road, branched off after a few miles and approached Lakeham. The country was magnificent, and the day hot and sunny. I enjoyed the last few miles, thinking I should have explored that part of England before instead of spending so many days and nights in stuffy, dirty London.

A signpost told me I was within three-quarters of a mile of Lakeham, and I slowed down, driving along the narrow lane until I reached a few cottages, a pub and a post office. I guessed I'd arrived.

I pulled up outside the pub, went in.

It was a quaint box-like place, almost like a doll's house. The woman who served me a double whisky seemed ready to talk, especially when she heard my accent.

We chatted about the surrounding country and this and that, then I asked her if she knew where a cottage called Beverley hung out.

"Oh, you mean Miss Scott?" she said, and there was an immediate look of disapproval in her eyes. "Her place's about a mile farther on. You take the first on your left and the cottage lies off the road. It has a thatched roof and a yellow gate. You can't miss it."

"That's swell," I said. "I know a friend of hers. Maybe I'll look her up. Do you know her? I was wondering what she was like. Think I'd be welcome?"

"From what I hear, men are always welcomed there," she said, with a sniff. "I've never seen 'er. No one in the village sees 'er. She only comes down for the weekends."

"Maybe she has someone to look after the cottage?" I suggested, wondering if I had made the journey for nothing.

"Mrs. Brambee does for 'er," the woman told me. "She ain't much 'erself."

I paid for my drink, thanked the woman, returned to the Buick.

It took me only a few minutes to find Beverley. I saw it through the trees as I drove up the narrow lane. It stood in a charming garden, a two-storied, thatch-roofed, rough-cast building, as attractive as any you could wish to see.

I parked the Buick outside, pushed open the gate and walked up the path. The sun beat down on me, and the smell of pinks, roses and wallflowers hung in the still air. I wouldn't have minded living there myself.

I went up to the oak nail-studded front door, rapped with the shiny brass knocker, feeling a curious uneasy excitement as I waited. I was

uneasy because I didn't know if Netta's sister had heard about Netta, and I wasn't sure how I should break the news. I was excited because I wondered if Anne was like her sister, and how we would get on together.

But after a few moments, I realized, with a sharp feeling of disappointment, that there was no one in, or at least, no one was going to answer my knock. I stood back, glanced up at the windows of the upper floor, then peered into the first window within reach on the ground floor. I could see the room stretching the length of the house, and the big garden through the windows at the back. The place was well furnished and comfortable. I moved around the house, until I reached the back. There was no one about, and I stood for a moment, hat in hand, looking across the well-kept lawn and at the flower-beds, a mass of brilliant colours.

I passed the back door, hesitated, tried the handle, but the door was locked. I moved on until I reached another window, paused as I noticed the curtains had been drawn.

I stared at the curtained window, and for no reason at all I suddenly felt spooked. I took a step forward, tried to see into the room, by peering through a chink in the curtain. I could see it was the kitchen, but my view was so limited I could only make out a dresser from which hung willow pattern cups and plates in rows along the ordered shelves.

Then I smelt coal-gas.

Feet crunched on the gravel. I swung around. Corridan and two uniformed policemen came striding towards me. Corridan's face was dour, his eyes showed irritation and anger.

"You better bust in quick," I said, before he could speak. "I smell gas."

chapter five

I sat fuming in the Buick outside the cottage, and watched the activity going on in and out the front door.

Corridan had been extremely curt and official when he had recovered from his surprise at seeing me.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he had demanded. Then he, too, smelt the gas. "This is no place for you. It's no good glaring at me. This is police business, and newspaper men are not wanted."

I began to argue with him, but he brushed past me, saying to one of the policemen, "Escort Mr. Harmas off the premises, please, and see he keeps out."

I felt inclined to clock the policeman on his beaky nose, but I knew it wouldn't get me anywhere so I returned to the car, sat in it, lit a cigarette and watched.

Corridan and the other policeman succeeded in breaking down the front door. They entered the cottage, while the second policeman remained at the gate to scowl at me. I scowled right back.

After a few moments, I saw Corridan opening the windows, then move out of sight. The sickly smell of gas drifted across the lawn. I waited a quarter of an hour before anything else happened. Then a car drove up and a tall dismal-looking guy carrying a black bag got out, had a word with the policeman at the gate, and together they went inside.

I didn't have to be clairvoyant to guess the guy was the village croaker.

After ten minutes, the dismal guy came out. I was waiting for him near his car, and he gave me a sharp, unfriendly look as he opened his car door.

"Pardon me, doc," I said, "I'm a newspaper man. Can you tell me what's going on in there?"

"You must ask Inspector Corridan," he snapped back, got into his car, drove away.

The policeman at the gate grinned behind his hand.

After a while the other policeman came out of the cottage, whispered something to his colleague, hurried off down the lane.

"I suppose he's gone to buy Corridan a toffee apple," I said to the policeman at the gate. "But don't tell me. Just let it mystify me."

The policeman grinned sympathetically. I could see he was the gossiping type and was bursting to talk to someone.

"E's off to get Mrs. Brambee wot looks after this 'ere cottage," he said, after a quick look around to make sure he wasn't overheard.

"Someone dead in there?" I asked, jerking my thumb to the cottage.

He nodded. "A young lady," he returned, moving closer to the Buick. "Pretty little thing. Suicide, of course. Put 'er 'ead in the gas oven. Been dead three or four days I should say."

"Never mind what you say," I returned. "What did the doc say."

The policeman grinned a little sheepishly. "That's wot 'e did say as a matter of fact."

I grunted. "Is it Anne Scott?"

"I dunno. The doc couldn't identify 'er. That's why Bert's gone for this 'ere Mrs. Brambee."

"What's comrade Corridan doing in there?" I asked.

"Sniffing around," the policeman returned, shrugging. From the expression on his face I guessed Corridan wasn't his favourite person. "I bet 'e's trying to make out there's more to this than meets the eye. The Yard men always do. It 'elps their promotion."

I thought this was a little unfair, but didn't say so, turned around to watch two figures coming down the lane. One of them was Bert, the policeman, the other was a tall, bulky woman in a pink sack-like dress.

"Here they come," I said, nodding in their direction.

The woman was walking quickly. She had a long stride, and the policeman seemed pressed to keep up with her. As they drew nearer, I could see her face. She was dark, sun-tanned, about forty, with a mass of black greasy hair, rolled up in an untidy bun at the back of her head. Straggling locks of hair fell over her face, and she kept brushing them back with a hand as big as a man's.

She ran up the flagged path. Her eyes were wild, her mouth was working. She looked as if she were suffering from acute grief and shock.

Bert winked at the other policeman as he followed the woman into the cottage.

I lit another cigarette, settled down in the car, waited a little anxiously.

A sudden animal-like cry drifted through the open windows, and was followed by the sound of wild hysterical sobbing.

"It must be Anne Scott," I said, troubled.

"Looks like it," the policeman returned, staring in the direction of the cottage.

After a long while the sobbing died down. We waited almost half an hour before the woman appeared again. She walked slowly, her face hidden by a dirty handkerchief, her shoulders sagging.

The policeman opened the gate for her, helped her through by taking her elbow. It was meant sympathetically, but she immediately shook him off.

"Take your bloody hands off me," she said in a muffled voice, went on down the lane.

"A proper lady," the policeman said, chewing his chin-strap and going red.

"Maybe she's been reading Macbeth," I suggested, but that didn't seem to console him.

It was how almost an hour and a half since I had seen Corridan. I was hungry. It was past one-thirty; but I decided to wait, hopeful I might see something more or get a chance of telling Corridan what I thought of him.

Ten minutes later he came to the door and waved to me. I was out of the car, past the policeman in split seconds.

"All right," he said curtly as I dashed up to him. "I suppose you want to look around. But for God's sake don't tell anyone I've let you in."

I decided that after all I hadn't wasted my money feeding this lug.

"Thanks," I said. "I won't tell a soul."

There was still a strong smell of gas in the cottage, which grew stronger as we entered the kitchen.

"It's Anne Scott all right," Corridan said gloomily, pointing to a huddled figure lying on the floor.

I stood over her, felt inadequate, could think of nothing to say.

She wore a pink dressing-gown and white pyjamas, her feet were bare, her hands clenched tightly into fists. Her head lay hidden in the gas oven. By moving around, carefully stepping over her legs, I could see into the oven. She was a blonde, about twenty-five; even in death she was attractive, although I could see no resemblance to Netta in the serene rather lovely face.

I stepped back, looked at Corridan. "Sure she's Anne Scott?" I asked.

He made an impatient movement. "Of course," he said. "The woman identified her. You're not trying to make out there's a mystery in this, are you?"

"Odd they should both commit suicide, isn't it?" I said, feeling in my bones that something was very wrong.

He jerked his head, walked into the sitting room.

"Read that," he said, handed me a sheet of note-paper. "It was found by her side."

I took the note, read:

Without Netta life means nothing to me. Please forgive me.

ANNE.

I handed it back. "After fifty years in the police force, I feel justified in saying that's a plant," I said.

He took the paper. "Don't try to be funny," he said coldly.

I grinned. "Who do you suppose it was addressed to?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Mrs. Brambee tells me a lot of

men used to come down here. There was one fellow-Peter-who Anne used to talk a lot about. Maybe it was for him."

"Would that be Peter Utterly?" I asked. "The guy who gave Netta the gun?"

Corridan rubbed his chin. "Doubtful," he said. "Utterly went back to the States a month or so ago."

"Yeah, I'd forgotten that," I said, wandering over to the writing-desk that stood in the window recess. "Well, I suppose you'll look for this guy?" I opened the lid of the desk, glanced inside. There were no papers, no letters. All the pigeon-holes had been carefully cleared. "She tidied up before she threw in her hand," I pointed out. "Any letters or papers anywhere?"

He shook his head.

"No means of checking if the handwriting of the note is really Anne's?"

"My dear fellow . . ." he began a little tartly.

"Skip it," I said. "I've a suspicious nature. Find anything interesting?"

"Nothing," he returned, eyed me narrowly. "I've searched the place thoroughly; there's nothing to connect her with forged bonds, diamond rings or anything like that. Sorry to disappoint you."

"I'll get over it," I said, grinning. "Just give me time. Find any silk stockings in the place?"

"I didn't look for silk stockings," he snapped back. "I've more important things to do."

"Let's look," I said. "I have a thing about silk stockings. Where's the bedroom?"

"Now look here, Harmas, this has gone far enough. I've let you in "For your rupture's sake, if not for me, calm down," I said, patting him on his arm. "What's the harm in looking? Netta had silk stockings and they vanished. Anne may have had silk stockings and they may still be here. Let's look."

He gave me an exasperated glare, turned to the door. "Wait here," he said, began to mount the stairs.

I kept on his heels. "You may need me. Always a good thing to have a witness."

He led the way into a small but luxuriously furnished bedroom, went immediately to a chest of drawers and began to paw over a mass of silk undies, sweaters and scarves.

"You handle that stuff like a married man," I said, opened the wardrobe, peered in. There were only two frocks and a two-piece costume hanging up. "She didn't have many clothes, poor kid," I went on. "Maybe she couldn't get coupons, or do you think she was a nudist?"

He scowled at me. "There're no stockings here," he said.

"No stockings of any kind at all?"

"No."

"Seems to confirm my nudist theory, doesn't it?" I said. "You might like to turn this stocking angle over in your nimble, sharp-witted mind. I'm going to do that myself, and I'm going to keep at it until I find out why neither of these girls had any stockings."

"What the hell are you driving at?" Corridan burst out. "You have a shilling-shocker mind. Who do you think you are-Perry Mason?"

"Don't tell me you read detective stories," I said, surprised. "Well, what happens now?"

"I'm waiting for the ambulance," Corridan said, following me downstairs. "The body will be taken to the Horsham mortuary, and the inquest will also be held there. I don't expect anything will come out at the inquest. It's pretty straightforward." But he sounded worried.

"Do you really think she learned about Netta's suicide and followed suit?" I asked.

"Why not?" he returned. "You'd be surprised how suicides follow in families. We have a bunch of statistics about it."

"I was forgetting you worked by rule of thumb," I returned. "What was the idea of keeping me out until you sniffed around?"

"Now see here, Harmas, you have no damn business here at all. You are here on sufferance," Corridan retorted. "This is a serious business, and I can't have rubbernecks watching me work."

"Calling me a rubberneck is as big a lie as calling what you do work," I said sadly. "But never mind. I'll behave, and thanks for the break anyway."

He looked sharply at me to see if I was kidding, decided I was, compressed his lips.

"Well, that's all there's to see. You'd better be moving before the ambulance arrives."

"Yeah, I'll be off," I said, wandering to the front door. "You wouldn't be interested in my theory about this second death I suppose?"

"Not in the slightest," he said firmly.

"I thought as much. It's a pity, because I think I could have put you on the right lines. I guess you'll have a guard on the body this time? You don't want it stolen like the other was, do you?"

"Oh, rubbish," he said crossly. "Nothing like that'll happen. But I'm taking precautions if that's what you mean."

"Oddly enough, that's exactly what I do mean," I said, smiled at him, opened the door. "Be seeing you, pal," I went on, left him.

I winked at the policeman at the gate, got into the Buick and drove slowly down the lane. I had a lot to think about, and I didn't quite know where to start. I thought it mightn't be a bad idea to have a word with Mrs. Brambee. That seemed the obvious starting-point.

I knew her cottage couldn't be far, as Bert, the policeman, had only been a few minutes fetching her. I didn't want Corridan to know what I was up to, so I drove to the end of the lane, parked the Buick behind a thicket, and walked back. I was lucky to meet a farmhand who pointed Mrs. Brambee's place out to me. It was small and dilapidated with a wild, overgrown garden.

I walked up the weed-covered path, rapped on the door. I had to knock three times before I heard shuffling feet. A moment later, the door jerked open and Mrs. Brambee confronted me. At close quarters she seemed half gypsy. She was very swarthy and her jet-black eyes were like little wet stones.

"What do you want?" she demanded in a harsh voice that somehow reminded me of the caw of a crow.

"I'm a newspaper man, Mrs. Brambee," I said, raising my hat; hoped she'd appreciate good manners. "I'd like to ask you a few questions about Miss Scott. You saw the body just now. Are you absolutely sure it was Miss Scott?"

Her eyes snapped. "Of course, it was Miss Scott," she said, beginning to close the door. "I don't know what you're talking about. Anyway, I don't intend to answer questions. You get off."

"I could make it worth your while," I said, jingling my loose change suggestively. "I want the inside story of this suicide, and my paper will pay generously for it."

"You and your paper can go to hell," she shouted violently, slammed the door, only I had my foot ready for just such a move.

"Now be nice," I said, smiling at her through the three-inch opening between the doorpost and the door. "Who is this guy Peter you were telling the Inspector about? Where can I find him?"

"She jerked open the door, put her hand on my chest and shoved.

I wasn't expecting such a move, and I staggered back, lost my balance, fell full-length. Her shove was like the kick from a horse.

The door slammed and I heard the bolt shoot home.

I got slowly to my feet, dusted myself down, whistled softly. Then I glanced up at the upper windows, stiffened.

I had a fleeting glimpse of a girl looking down at me. Even as I looked up, she jerked back from the window and out of sight. I couldn't even swear that it was a girl: it might have been a man-even an optical illusion. But unless my eyes had deceived me, Netta Scott was upstairs, and had been watching me.

chapter six

I was glancing through the newspaper, morning coffee on the table by my bed, when a small item of news caught my eye. I sat up, nearly upsetting the tray.

MYSTERIOUS FIRE AT HORSHAM MORTUARY ran the headline. The few lines below the headline stated that at twelve o'clock the previous night a fire had broken out in the Horsham mortuary, and the efforts of the local fire brigade were unavailing. The building had been completely destroyed, and three policemen, who were on the premises, narrowly escaped with their lives.

I threw the paper down, grabbed the telephone and put a call through to Corridan. I was told that he was out of town.

I jumped out of bed, wandered into the bathroom, took a cold shower. I shaved, came back to the bedroom, began to dress. All the time I was thinking.

Someone behind the scenes was controlling this set-up, like a puppet-master pulling the strings. Whoever it was had to be stopped.

If Corridan wasn't smart enough to stop him, then I was going to have a try. Up to now, I'd tagged along in the rear as an interested spectator. I was now going to take a more active part in this business.

I decided first to give Corridan one more chance. I asked the switchboard girl to connect me with the Horsham police. After the inevitable delay I was put through.

"Is Inspector Corridan with you, please?" I asked.

"Hold on, sir," a voice invited me.

Corridan came on the line. "Yes?" he snapped. "What is it?" He sounded like a lion who'd seen someone swipe his dinner.

"Hello," I said. "This is your conscience calling you from the Savoy Hotel. What have you got on your mind this morning?"

"For God's sake don't bother me now, Harmas," Corridan returned. "I'm busy."

"When aren't you?" I said. "That's a sweet little item in the newspaper this morning. What does Anne Scott look like now? Done to a turn or burnt to a crisp?"

"I know what you're thinking," he said savagely. "It was nothing like that at all. These fools here store their petrol in the mortuary of all places, and a faulty electric wire set it off. We've satisfied ourselves that there's no evidence of arson, although it is a most extraordinary coincidence. The body was practically burnt to a cinder. Fortunately, of course, it has been officially identified, so there'll be no trouble at the inquest. Now you've heard the details, for goodness' sake get off

the line and let me get on with my work."

"Don't rush away," I said quickly. "I'm not satisfied about this business, Corridan. Coincidence be damned for a tale. Look, I think . . ."

"So long, Harmas," he broke in. "Someone's waiting to speak to me," and he hung up.

I slammed down the receiver, selected four of the worst words in my cursing vocabulary, said them, felt better. That settled it, I thought. I was going to get into this business with both feet and the hell with Corridan.

I went downstairs, buttonholed the hall porter.

"Brother," I said to him, "can you tell me where I can hire a reliable private detective?"

For a moment a look of faint astonishment showed in his eyes, then he became once more the perfect servant.

"Certainly, sir," he said, going to his desk. "I have an address here. J. B. Merryweather, Thames House, Millbank. Mr. Merryweather was, at one time, a Chief Inspector at Scotland Yard."

"Swell," I said, parted with two half-crowns, asked him to call me a taxi.

I found J. B. Merryweather's office on the top floor of a vast concrete and steel building overlooking an uninspired portion of the Thames.

Merryweather was short and fat; his face the colour of a mulberry, and covered with a network of fine blue veins. His small eyes were watery, and the whites tinged with yellow. His long nose gave him a hawk-like appearance, which, I should imagine, was good for trade. I wasn't particularly impressed by him, but from what I had seen of private investigators in my country, the less impressive they were the better results they obtained.

Merryweather eyed me over as I entered his tiny, somewhat dusty office, offered a limp hand, waved me to a straight-backed chair. He folded himself down in his swivelled chair which creaked alarmingly under his weight, sunk his knobbly chin deep into a rather soiled stiff collar. His eyes drooped as he gave what he probably imagined to be a fair imitation of a booze-ridden Sherlock Holmes.

"I should like your name," he said, taking a pad and pencil from his desk drawer, "for my records, and the address, if you please."

I told him who I was, said I was staying at the Savoy Hotel. He nodded, wrote the information on the pad, said the Savoy was a nice place to live in.

I agreed, waited.

"It's your wife, I suppose?" he asked in a deep, weary voice which seemed to start from his feet.

"I'm not married," I said, taking out a carton of cigarettes, lighting one. He leaned forward hopefully, so I pushed the carton across the desk. He eased out a cigarette, struck a match on his desk, lit up.

"Difficult things to get these days," he sighed. "I'm out of them this morning. Nuisance."

I said it was, ran my fingers through my hair, wondered what he'd say when he knew what I'd come about. I had a feeling he might have a stroke.

"Blackmail, perhaps?" he asked, blowing a cloud of smoke down his vein-covered nose.

"Something rather more complicated than that," I said, trying to make myself comfortable in the chair. "Suppose I begin at the beginning?"

He made a slight grimace as if he wasn't anxious to hear a long story, muttered something about being pretty busy this morning.

I looked around the shabby office, decided he could never be busy, but was suffering from an inferiority complex, said I'd been recommended to him by the hall porter of the Savoy Hotel.

He brightened immediately. "Damn good chap that," he said, rubbing his hands. "Many a time we've worked together in the old days."

"Well, maybe I'd better get on with it," I said, a little bored with him. I told him about Netta, how we had met, the kind of things we did, and how I had arrived at her flat to find she had committed suicide.

He sank lower in his chair, a bewildered, rather dismayed expression on his face as I talked.

I told him how the body had been stolen from the mortuary, and he flinched. I went on to tell him about Anne, how I had gone to her cottage and what happened there.

"The police moved her body to the Horsham mortuary last night,"

I concluded, beginning to enjoy myself. I presented him with my Piece de resistance, the clipping from the morning's newspaper.

He had to find his spectacles before he could read it, and when he had, I could see he wished he hadn't; also wished I hadn't come to worry him.

"The body was burned to a cinder, so I'm told," I went on. "Now you know the set-up, what do you think?"

"My dear sir," he said, waving his hands vaguely, "this isn't in my line at all. Divorce, blackmail, breach of promise, yes. This kind of novelette drama no."

I nodded understandingly. "I thought you might feel that way about it," I said. "It's a pity. Never mind, I'll probably find someone else to do the work." As I was speaking I took out my wallet, glanced inside as if

looking for something. I gave him plenty of time to see the five hundred one-pound notes I was still carrying. Whatever else was wrong with him, his eyesight, as far as spotting money was concerned, was excellent.

He levered himself up in his chair, adjusted his tie.

"What do you suggest I might do to help you?" he ventured cautiously.

I put the wallet away. To him, it was like a black cloud passing before the face of the sun.

"I wanted someone to investigate at Lakeham," I said. "I want to get everything I can on this woman, Mrs. Brambee, and I want a background picture of Anne Scott."

He brightened visibly. "Well, that's something we might be able to do," he said, and looked hopefully at the carton of cigarettes on his desk. "I wonder if you'd mind . . ."

"Go ahead," I said.

He took another cigarette, became quite genial.

"Yes, I think we could help you do that," he went on, drawing down a lungful of smoke. "I have an excellent man, very discreet. I could put him on the job." His eyes closed for a moment, then snapped open. "It isn't our usual line of investigation, you know. It might-hum — cost a little more."

"I'll pay well for results," I returned. "What are your terms?"

"Well, now let me see. Shall we say ten pounds a week and three pounds a day expenses?" He looked hopefully at me, looked away.

"For that I'd expect to hire Sherlock Holmes himself," I said, and meant it.

Mr. Merryweather tittered, put his hand over his mouth, looked embarrassed.

"It's an expensive age we live in," he sighed, shaking his head.

I was glad I hadn't told him about the attempted attack on me, or about the guy following me in the Standard car. He would probably have added danger money to the bill.

"Well, all right," I said, shrugging. "Only I want results." I counted thirty-one pounds on to his desk. "That'll hold you for one week. Get me everything you can on Anne Scott, have someone watch Mrs. Brambee's cottage. I want to know who goes in and who comes out, what she does and why she does it."

"It's a police job really," he said, whisking the money into a drawer and turning the key. "Who's in charge of the case?"

"Inspector Corridan," I told him.

His face darkened. "Oh, that fellow," he said, scowling. "One of the bright boys. Wouldn't have lasted a day in my time. I know him-a Chief's pet." He seemed to withdraw into himself, brooding and bitter.

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if we find out a lot more than he does. I believe in old-fashioned methods. Police work is ninety per cent patience and ten per cent luck. These new scientific methods make a man lazy."

I grunted, stood up. "Well, I guess I'll be hearing from you. Remember: no results, no more money."

He nodded, smiled awkwardly. "Quite so, Mr. Harmas. I like dealing with business men. One knows where one is so to speak."

The door opened at this moment, and a little guy slid into the room. He was shabby, middle-aged, pathetically sad-looking. His straggling moustache was stained with nicotine, his watery eyes peered at me like a startled rabbit's.

"Ah, you've come at the opportune moment," Mr. Merryweather said, rubbing his hands. He turned to me. "This is Henry Littlejohns, who will personally work on your case." He made it sound as if this odd little man was Philo Vance, Nick Charles and Perry Mason all rolled into one. "This is Mr. Harmas who has just given us a most interesting case."

There was no enthusiastic light in Mr. Littlejohn's faded eyes. I guessed he had visions of hanging around more draughty passages, looking through more sordid keyholes, standing outside more houses in the rain. He muttered something through his moustache, stood staring down at his boots.

"I'd like to talk to Mr. Littlejohns," I said to Merryweather. "Can I take him along with me?"

"Of course," Mr. Merryweather said, beaming, "By all means take him along with you."

"We'll go back to my hotel," I said to Littlejohns. "I'd like you to have details of this case."

He nodded, muttered again under his breath, opened the door for me.

We walked to the elevator, rode down to the ground-level in silence.

I waved to a taxi, ushered Mr. Littlejohns in and as I was about to follow, something — intuition, instinct, something-made me turn quickly and look behind me.

The young runt who had tried to dent my skull and who had followed me in the Standard was standing in a doorway watching me.

For a second our eyes met, then he spat on the pavement, sauntered off in the opposite direction.

chapter seven

Henry Littlejohns looked as out of place in the Savoy as a snowman in the middle of August. He sat on the edge of a chair, his bowler hat resting on his knees, a sad expression on his face.

I told him about Netta, took him through every detail of the story, concluded with the burning of Anne's body.

Throughout the recital, he sat motionless. The sad expression remained on his face, but I could tell by the intent look in his eyes that he wasn't missing a thing.

"A very interesting story," he said when I had finished. "It calls for a most searching investigation."

I said I thought he was right, and what did he think of the set-up now that I had given him the facts?

He sat chewing his moustache for a moment or so, then looked up.

"I think Miss Scott's alive," he said. "The fact that her clothes are missing, the body stolen to prevent identification and that you think you saw her yesterday seems proof enough to me. If she is alive, then we shall have to discover who the dead woman was in Miss Scott's flat. We shall also have to find out whether Miss Scott had anything to do with her death; whether it was murder or suicide, whether there was anyone else implicated. It seems to me that if Miss Scott arranged for the dead woman to be mistaken for her, she must have an urgent reason for going into hiding. That's another thing we must discover. The fact that she didn't take the money nor the diamond ring, although she had time to pack her clothes, would point to a third party being present whom she did not trust and from whom she was anxious to conceal the fact that she had such valuables in the flat. We must find out who that third party was."

"You worked all that out in a few minutes," I said, regarding him thoughtfully. "I worked it out too, only I took a little longer, but Corridan hasn't got around to it yet. Now why? Why should Corridan still insist that Netta committed suicide?"

Littlejohns allowed himself a bleak smile. "I have had some experience of Inspector Corridan," he said. "He is a most misleading man. I suggest from my knowledge of his methods that he has arrived at this conclusion but he is not letting you know that he has done so. It may be, sir, that he considers you're implicated in this case, and is allowing you to think he has hold of the wrong end of the stick in the hope you will be over-confident and commit yourself. The Inspector is a deep thinker, and I wouldn't underestimate his abilities for a moment."

I gaped at him. "Well, I'll be damned," I said. "That idea never occurred to me."

For a moment Littlejohns relaxed sufficiently to look almost human. "The Inspector, in spite of what Mr. Merryweather says, is a brilliant investigator. He has caught more criminals by pretending to know nothing when he has known the full facts than any other of the Yard's personnel. I should be most careful what you say or do as far as he's concerned."

"Okay, I'll remember that," I said. "Now the next step is to dig and keep digging until we find something important to work on. I'm sure you're right about Netta. She's alive and she's arranged with Cole to identify this dead woman as herself. That explains why the body was kidnapped. They are keeping the body away from me. Will you go down to Lakeham right away and keep an eye on Mrs. Brambee's cottage? Look out for Netta. I think she's hiding there. I'll do what I can up here and in a couple of days or so we'll get together and see how far we've got."

Littlejohns said he'd go to Lakeham immediately, left with a much more sprightly step than when he had come.

The rest of the day I worked at my first article on Post-War Britain for the United News Agency. I had already obtained a considerable amount of material for the article so I was able to settle in my room and make my first rough draft. I became so absorbed in my work that the problem of Netta and her sister ceased to nag me. By six-thirty I had completed the draft, and decided to leave it until the next day before polishing and checking my facts.

I rang for the floor waiter, lit a cigarette and sat before the open window looking down on the Embankment. Now that I had put the lid on my typewriter, Netta took over my thoughts. I wondered what Corridan was doing. The more I thought about Littlejohns's theory the more sure I was that Corridan knew that Netta hadn't committed suicide, and that I might be hooked up in the case in some way.

The floor waiter, who was fast beginning to learn my habits, arrived at this moment with a double whisky, water and ice bucket. I added a little water and ice to a lot of whisky, stretched out more comfortably in the armchair. Now what, I asked myself, was I going to do to help solve the puzzle of the missing body? As far as I could see there were three things I could do that might lead to something: first, I could find out all I could about Julius Cole. If the girl who had died in Netta's flat was not Netta, then Julius Cole was in this business up to his neck. It would obviously pay to keep an eye on him. Then there was Madge Kennitt, the occupier of the first-floor flat. She might have seen something. I had to find out if anyone had called the night the girl died. I had a hunch that Netta wasn't involved in this business, but

had, in some way, been implicated against her will. If that was so a third person had been in the flat on that night. Madge Kennitt might have seen him or her. Finally, I could visit the Blue Club, and try to find out if Netta had any special friends among the hostesses, and if she did, and if I could locate her, to find out from her anything about Netta that might give me a lead.

By the time I had finished my whisky, I had decided to visit the Blue Club. I took my shower, changed into a dark suit and wandered downstairs for an early supper in the almost deserted grillroom.

I arrived at the Blue Club a few minutes to nine o'clock, too early for the main crowd, but late enough to find the cocktail bar full.

The Blue Club was a three-storey building halfway up Bruton Mews behind Bruton Place. It was a shabby, faded-looking place, and you could pass it without knowing it was there. But inside you stepped from a cobbled dreary Mews, into a miniature palace of rather overpowering luxury.

The cocktail bar was on the same floor as the dance room. I wandered in, glanced around, failed to see a vacant seat so I crossed to the bar, propped myself up.

Sam, the barman, recognized me, gave me a broad welcoming smile.

"Hi, Sam," I said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Harmas," he said, polishing a glass and setting it before me. "Nice to see you again. You all right?"

"Pretty good," I said, "and how's your girlfriend?"

Sam had always confided to me about the ups and down of his love-life, and I knew he expected me to inquire what the latest position was.

"I get discouraged sometimes, Mr. Harmas," he said, shaking his head. "That girl of mine has a split mind. One part of it says yes, the other no. As they both operate at once, I'm kept on my toes wondering whether to retreat or advance. It's getting bad for my nerves. What will you drink, sir?"

"Oh, a Scotch," I said, glanced around the room.

I could see the crowd wasn't the kind that'd interest me. The girls were tough, showily dressed and on the make. The men were smooth, looked as if they'd escaped military service, and had too much doubtfully earned money to spend.

"Things have changed a lot, haven't they, Sam?" I said, as I paid twice as much for my drink as I pay elsewhere.

"They have, sir," he agreed, "and a great pity, too. I miss the old crowd. This bunch's just trash. They give me a pain to waste liquor on them."

"Yeah," I said, lighting a cigarette. "I miss the old faces, too."

We chatted for a few minutes about the past, and I told him what I was doing here, then I said, "Sad about Netta. You read about it, I guess?"

Sam's face clouded. "I read about it. It beats me why she did it. She seemed happy enough, and she was doing fine here. She had Bradley eating out of her hand. Any idea why she did it?"

I shook my head. "I've only just arrived, Sam, I reminded him. " I saw the thing in the newspapers, but I was hoping you could tell me what was behind it. Poor kid. I'll miss her. What are the other bims like here?"

Sam pulled a face. "They'll take the hide off your back if they thought they could make it into a pair of gloves," he said gloomily.

"They have a one-track mind—if you can call what they've got minds. I'd lay off 'em if I were you, except Crystal. You should meet Crystal. She's quite an experience. I'll fix it if you're looking for a little female society."

"She's new here, isn't she?" I asked, not recalling the name. He grinned. "New and fresh," he said. "Came about a year ago. Can I fix you another drink?"

"Go ahead," I said, pushing my glass towards him, "and buy one for yourself. She wasn't a friend of Netta's, was she?"

"Well, I don't know about being friends, but they sort of got on together. The other dames didn't appeal to Netta. She was always fighting with them, but Crystal . . . well, I don't think anyone would fight with Crystal. She's a real dizzy blonde."

"She sounds what I've been looking for. Dizzy blondes are up my alley. Is she a looker?"

Sam kissed his fingers, wagged his head. "She's got a topography like a scenic railway, and every time she comes into the bar the ice cubes go on the boil."

I laughed. "Well, if she's free and would like a big guy with hair on his chest for company, shoo her along."

"She'll like you," Sam said. "She's crazy about big muscular men; she tells me her mother was frightened by a wrestler. I'll get her."

I had finished my drink by the time he returned. He nodded, winked.

"Two minutes," he said, began to mix a flock of martinis.

She arrived a good ten minutes later. I spotted her before she spotted me. There was something about her that amused me. Maybe it was her big cornflower blue eyes or her snub nose. I don't know, but you had only to take one look at her and you were pretty sure she was the girl who originated the phrase "a dumb blonde." She was all Sam had said. Her figure made me blink: it made the male section in the room blink too.

Sam waved, and she came over, looked at me, and her eyelids fluttered.

"Oh!" she said. Then: "Oh, Boy!"

"Crystal, this is Mr. Steve Harmas," Sam said, winking at me. "He cuts the hairs on his chest with a lawnmower."

She put her hand into mine, squeezed it.

"There was a tea leaf in the bottom of my cup that looked just like you," she confided. "I knew I was going to have fun tonight." She looked anxiously at Sam. "Have any of the girls seen him yet?"

"You're the first," he returned, winking at me again.

"What a break!" she exclaimed, turning back to me. "I've been dreaming about a man like you ever since I've had those kind of dreams."

"Hey, wait a minute," I said, kidding her. "Maybe I'd better have a look at the other girls. I'm kind of selective."

"You don't have to look at them. They're only called girls to distinguish them from the male customers. They've been girls so long they think a brassiere is a place to eat. Come on, let's have fun."

"What kind of fun can we have in this joint?" I asked. "It's too crowded for my kind of fun."

Her blue eyes popped open. "Oh, I like lots of people. My father says a girl can't come to any harm so long as she stays with a crowd."

"Your father's crazy," I said, grinning. "Suppose you fell in with a crowd of sailors?"

She thought about this, frowning. "I don't think my father knows anything about sailors," she said seriously. "He stuffs birds and things."

"You mean he's a taxidermist?"

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her blonde curls, "He can't drive."

"Let's skip your father," I said hurriedly. "Let's talk about you. How about a drink?"

"I could go for a large gin with a very little lime if the gin was large enough," she said, brightening. "Do you think I could have that?"

I nodded to Sam, pulled up a stool, patted it. "Park your weight," I said. "How do you like it here?"

She climbed up on the stool, sat down, rested her small hands on the bar. "I love it," she told me. "It's so sinful and nice. You've no idea how dull it is at home. There's only father and me and all the animals that need stuffing. You'd be surprised at the animals people bring to father. He's working on a stag some crank wants to keep in his hall. Can you imagine having a stuffed stag in your hall?"

"You could always hang your hat and umbrella on its antlers," I said, after giving the matter thought.

She drank some of the gin. "You're the kind of person who makes the best of everything," she said. "I'll tell father about that idea. He

might make money out of it." She sipped more gin, sighed. "I love this stuff. Now I can't get a two-way stretch, it's the only thing that holds me together." An idea struck her, and she grabbed hold of my arm.

"Did you bring any silk stockings over with you?"

"Sure," I said. "I have half a dozen pairs of nylons at my hotel."

She clenched her fists, shut her eyes.

"Six pairs?" she repeated in a hoarse whisper.

"That's right."

"Oh, dear," she said, shivered. "You weren't thinking of giving them to anyone, were you? They couldn't be lying in your old room unattached so to speak?"

"I brought them for someone," I said quietly.

She nodded to herself. "I might have guessed it," she said, sighed.

"Well, never mind. Some girls have all the luck. Some get them, others just dream about them. You certainly made my heart go pit-a-pat for a moment. But I shall get over it."

"I brought them for Netta Scott," I explained. "She was a friend of mine."

Crystal turned quickly, her eyes showed surprise. "Netta? You knew Netta?"

"Sure."

"And you brought the stockings . . . but, she's dead. Didn't you know?"

"Yes, I know."

"Then you haven't anyone to give . . ." She caught herself up, actually blushed. "Oh, I am awful! Poor Netta! I always get depressed when I think of her. I feel I could cry right now."

"If you want those stockings you can have them," I said. "Netta can't use them, so they're unattached as you put it."

Her eyes brightened. "I don't know what to say. I'd love them-they'd save my life, but knowing they were for Netta . . . well, it does make a difference, doesn't it?"

"Does it?"

She thought, frowning. I could see she would always find thought difficult: she just wasn't the thinking type.

"I don't know. I suppose not. I mean . . . well, where are they?"

"At my hotel. Shall we go over and get them?"

She slid off her stool. "You mean right now? This very moment?"

"Why not? Can you get away?"

"Oh, yes. All we girls are free lances. We make what we pick up-doesn't it sound sordid?" She giggled. "I suppose I'd have to come all the way up to your room and there wouldn't be any crowds in there?"

I shook my head. "No crowds. Just you and me."

She looked doubtful. "I don't know whether I should. My father said

he'd be terribly angry if I ever appeared in the News of the World."

"Who's going to tell the News of the World?" I asked patiently.

She brightened up again. "I wish I was clever. Do you know, I never thought of that. Well, come on. Let's go."

I finished my drink. "Is there a garage at the back of this joint?"

She nodded. "Yes, a big one. Why?"

I patted her hand. "Some Americans like to look at old churches," I said, smiling. "I'm crazy about garages. You'd be surprised at the number of garages there are to look at. They're full of oil and interest."

"But why garages?" she asked blankly.

"Why old churches?" I returned.

She nodded. "I expect you're right. I had an uncle who liked visiting public houses. I suppose it's the same sort of idea."

"Along those lines," I said, walked with her to the door.

As we reached the head of the stairs, I saw a big woman coming up. She wore a black evening dress and a heavy gold collar surrounded her thick neck. Her black hair was scraped back and her broad, rather sullen face was a mask of make-up. I drew back to allow her to pass. She came on, gave Crystal a cold hard stare, didn't notice me, went on.

I stared after her, a tingling sensation running down my spine.

The woman was Mrs. Brambee.

chapter eight

Do you know what it means when a girl is said to be ruined?" Crystal asked, sitting on the bed and surveying my room with approval.

I put my hat in the cupboard, sat down in the armchair. "I have a vague idea," I said, smiling at her. "But it's a little technical to go into at this stage of our association. What makes you ask?"

She fluffed up her blonde curls. "My father says that if a girl allows a man to take her into his bedroom, she's as good as ruined."

I nodded gravely. "There are times when your father talks sense," I said, "but it doesn't count with me. You're not the ruining type."

"I thought there was a catch in it," she said, sighing. "Nothing ever happens to me. Confidentially, my greatest ambition is to be chased up a dark alley by a man with glaring eyes. I've hung around dark alleys until I'm sick and tired of them, but no man with or even without glaring eyes ever shows up."

"Remember Bruce and the spider and keep trying," I said. "Something's bound to happen sooner or later."

She nodded, sighed. "Oh, well, I've waited so long now, I can wait some more. May I see those stockings or do I have to wait for those too?"

"You can not only see them, but you can have them," I said, fetched them from my wardrobe. "Catch." I tossed them into her lap.

While she was drooling over the stockings I rang for the floor waiter, and then lit a cigarette.

My visit to the Blue Club hadn't been a waste of time. Meeting Mrs. Brambee had been a stroke of luck, especially as she hadn't seen me. Crystal had told me that she had seen Mrs. Brambee in the club regularly every Thursday night. She appeared to have business with Jack Bradley, and after, she had dinner and went away. No one knew who she was; she always dined alone, and always left the club immediately after finishing her meal.

This information intrigued me. When I first saw Mrs. Brambee she was so obviously the village charwoman that meeting her dressed up in her finery had come as a complete surprise. I decided to pass this information on to Littlejohns. It might help him to find out what kind of game Mrs. Brambee was playing.

Then the visit to the club's garage had also been fruitful. The first car I had seen in the vast cellar, running under the club, had been the battered Standard Fourteen that had followed me on my run to Lakeham.

Slowly, bits of the jig-saw puzzle were fitting themselves together.

For some reason Jack Bradley was interested in my moves. I was pretty sure that the youth who had followed me was acting on Bradley's instructions. I thought Crystal could enlighten me, and turned from the window to ask her. I found her in the act of changing her stockings.

"Don't look now," she said with a giggle, rolling the nylons up her shapely legs. "I'm in what is known as an intimate situation."

"Hey! Get that limb out of sight," I said, as I heard a gentle tap on the door, and the handle turn.

The floor waiter drifted in as Crystal hurriedly adjusted her dress.

His eyes flickered for a second, then he looked at me, coldly inquiring.

"A double whisky and a large gin and lime," I said, trying to look as if Crystal was my sister.

He inclined his head, drifted out again. His back was stiff with disapproval.

"I guess I'll be the guy who'll be ruined," I sighed, sitting in the armchair again. "Will you hurry and get that leg show over before he returns?"

"Don't you like it?" Crystal asked, hurt. "I thought you'd go all popeyed and coy." She put on her shoes, regarded her legs with unconcealed delight. "They are lovely, aren't they?" she exclaimed. "I can't thank you enough." She rushed over to me, sat on my lap and twined her arms around my neck. "You're a good, kind pet and I adore you," she went on, nibbled the lobe of my ear with her sharp little teeth.

I pushed her off, got up and plumped her in the chair.

"Stay still and behave," I said. "I want to talk to you."

"Talk away. I'll listen," she said, hugging her knees and peering at me over the top of them with her big, dizzy blue eyes.

"Have you ever seen in the club a young guy, slight, dark, sallow complexion, wears a grey greasy looking hat, clean shaven, about twenty, who drives that Standard I pointed out to you?" I asked.

"Oh, you mean Frankie," Crystal said at once. "He's a horrible boy. None of the girls like him."

"That doesn't surprise me," I said, called, "Come in," as the waiter tapped, and received the drinks with as much nonchalance as I could muster. When he had gone, I went on, "What does he do?"

"Frankie?" Crystal raised her shapely shoulders. "He hangs around. I suppose he does all Bradley's dirty work. He drives the car, runs errands - those kind of things. Why are you interested?"

"It'd take too long to tell you," I said, putting her off. "You liked Netta Scott, didn't you?"

"I don't like women," Crystal said promptly. "I'm too busy trying to like men. I'm mad about men. Did you know my mother was frightened by a wrestler just before I was born?"

"I know. Sam told me."

"It's had ever such a funny effect on me . . ." Crystal began, but I interrupted.

"Never mind about that," I said hastily. "Let's talk about Netta. Sam tells me you two got on together."

"I suppose we did," Crystal said indifferently. "She was a bit odd, but she didn't try to steal my men, and I didn't want Jack Bradley or her other boys, so we didn't ever come to blows."

"Were you surprised when you heard what had happened to her?"

"I was stricken in a heap. I was sure she'd never have done an awful thing like that. It just shows, doesn't it? My father always says . . ."

"And we'll leave your father out of this conversation too," I said. "Will you try to remember that? Wrestlers and your father-out! Tell me something about Netta. Did you ever meet her sister?"

Crystal frowned. "I didn't know she had a sister."

"She never mentioned one?"

"Oh, no, but then she might have and I mightn't have listened. You see, if she had said she had a brother . . ."

"Yes, yes, I can understand that, but we're talking about her sister. All right. You didn't know she had a sister. Did she ever speak about going to a village in Sussex called Lakeham."

"No. Lakeham? I don't know the place."

"Don't let that worry you," I said kindly, "There must be a whale of a lot of other places you don't know either. Tell me something else. You'll be able to answer this one. Did she have a regular boyfriend while you knew her?"

"Oh, yes," Crystal said, perking up. "She did have someone, but she never talked about him. In fact, she was quite secretive about him. I saw him twice, although Netta didn't know. I was on the look-out for him. The first time I saw him he was driving a marvellous black-and-yellow Bentley. He picked Netta up outside the club." She sighed. "I wish one of my boys had a Bentley."

"What's this guy like?" I asked, interested.

She shook her head. "I never once saw his face. He was big' tall and hefty. Both times I saw him it was dark and he was in the car."

"Could it be anyone in the club, do you think?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no, I know it wasn't."

I suddenly thought of Julius Cole. He was big and hefty. He had been the one who had identified the dead girl as Netta. He had a flat below Netta's. He might qualify quite easily.

"Ever heard of a man named Julius Cole?" I asked.

She shook her head. "'You know, I didn't expect this," she said a little peevishly. "I thought we were going to have some ruinous fun. I'm beginning to think you're more interested in your silly old questions than in ruining me."

"Smart girl," I said, grinning at her. "I am. You're not the ruining type. Besides I'm asking these questions for a purpose. I don't think Netta's dead. If she is dead, then she didn't commit suicide, she was murdered."

Crystal stared at me. "I know I'm a little dumb," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "but I can't be expected to understand what you've just said, can I; or can't I?"

"No, you can't," I agreed. "Would you like to know more about it? Would you like also to play at being a lady detective?"

"My father says detectives are common," Crystal returned, her eyes opening wide. "They listen at keyholes, and my father says that's common. I used to listen at keyholes when I was young; I suppose that's why he said it."

"Isn't it possible to leave your father out of this conversation?" I pleaded. "He seems always to be turning up."

"He always is. I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't burst in here and hit you over the head with a stuffed mongoose."

I sighed. "I'll chance it. Shall we get back to the original question? Do we or do we not work on this puzzle?"

"I wish I knew what you were talking about," she said plaintively.

I decided that if I could make her understand, it might be useful to have her planted in the club to keep me informed of what was going on there. She might pick up some useful information which might give me the lead I was looking for. I was now certain that the Blue Club was tied up in some way with the puzzle of the missing bodies.

So with infinite patience I told her the whole story. She sat staring at me, her mouth a little open, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Well, now," I concluded, "you know as much about this business as I do. Bradley is tied in somehow. This guy Frankie is in it, too. Julius Cole might be Netta's boyfriend with the Bentley. Mrs. Brambee isn't what she seems. Don't you see, there are a lot of angles. Some of these angles might be cleared up if you keep your eyes and ears open. All you have to do is to listen and watch. Try to find out why Mrs. Brambee sees Bradley every week. If I knew that I might have the answer to one of my problems. Will you do it?"

She sighed. "Oh, well, I suppose so. You'll argue me into it in the long run if I do say no. All right, I'll do it, but don't expect too much, will you?"

I patted her hand. "Do your best, and I'll not ask more than that."

The telephone rang shrilly. I answered it. The Inquiry Desk said

Inspector Corridan was asking for me.

"Tell him I'll be right down," I said, hung up.

"Well!" Crystal exclaimed. "I suppose now you're going to get rid of me. And I thought you were going to show me your etchings."

"You're not the first girl who's been disappointed," I said. "Now slip away like a startled mouse. Scotland Yard is downstairs and I don't want him to see you."

"Goodness!" she exclaimed, jumping up. "I don't want to see him either." She grabbed up her precious nylons, slipped on her wrap, sped to the door. Then she paused, rushed back, flung her arms around my neck, kissed me. "Thanks again for the lovely stockings. I like you. Don't let's be so stuffy the next time we meet."

I said I'd see her in a day or so, steered her to the door, opened it.

Corridan was standing outside, his hand raised to knock. He gave Crystal a surprised, rather shocked look, stood aside.

Crystal slid past him, hurried down the corridor without a backward glance."

"Hullo," I said. "I thought I told the Desk to tell you I was coming down."

He wandered in, closed the door. "Oh, I didn't want to bother you to do that," he said. "I hope I'm not intruding." He gave me the nearest he could come to in the leer line. "Friend of yours?"

"Certainly not," I said. "That's the floor waiter's daughter. She was cleaning the bath."

He nodded, roamed around the room. "I've seen her at the Blue Club on my one and only official visit, I believe, or am I mistaken?"

"At times you are quite observant," I said, tartly.

"Oh, I notice blondes," he returned with a dour smile. "Does that mean you were at the club tonight?"

"Fortunately I don't yet have to account to you for my actions, motives or movements," I returned, eyeing him. "But if you're bursting with curiosity I don't mind admitting I was there. Furthermore, I did bring the blonde back with me. I had some silk stockings, and as I had no one to give them to, I thought she might have them. There was nothing immoral about the transaction, although, at a later date, I hope something along those lines may be arranged. Satisfied?"

He didn't appear to be listening.

"I dropped in as I was passing because I thought you'd be interested to hear the coroner's verdict on Anne Scott," he said, pausing to look out of the uncurtained windowed.

"I can guess what it was," I returned. "Suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed. Tell me, have you satisfied yourself that Netta had a sister?"

He looked at me, his eyelids drooped. "What a rum chap you are,"

he said. "Of course I satisfied myself there is such a person as Anne Scott and she was Netta's sister. What kind of a policeman do you think I am? You'll find the record in Somerset House if you feel like checking it."

"Okay," I said, shrugging. "I wanted to see how thorough you've been. How about Netta's verdict?"

He shrugged. "The body will have to be found first. We're looking for it."

"I see the Press haven't got the story."

Corridan scowled. "And they're not having it," he said grimly. "As it is the Chief is raising blue murder. The less publicity at this stage the better. We can rely on you to say nothing I hope?"

I grinned. "Sure," I said, "I'll keep your guilty secret. Nothing more to tell me?"

He shook his head. "Not just yet," he returned, "but I'll keep you in the picture." He moved to the door. "Come down and have a drink?"

"I'm coming down, but I can't stop for a drink. I have something important to do."

"It's nearly eleven o'clock," Corridan said, raising his eyebrows.

"Come on, and don't be unsociable."

"Sorry, my work is too urgent," I said, walking with him to the elevator.

"By the way," he said casually, as we waited for the elevator to come from the ground floor. "You and Netta were lovers at one time, weren't you?"

I remembered what Littlejohns had said, grinned to myself.

"Not really," I returned. "Just a boy and a girl romance."

He nodded, stepped into the elevator and we rode down in silence.

"Do change your mind," he said when we reached the lobby.

"Sorry," I said, shaking hands. "But I've got to get along. So long. Have a drink on me."

He nodded. "So long, Harmas," he said, turned back. "Oh, there's just one little thing, you'll keep out of this business, won't you? I think I mentioned it before. It's not easy for my men to follow up leads if they've already been disturbed by enthusiastic newspaper men. That kind of thing's all right in your country, but not here. You might bear that in mind."

We exchanged somewhat dirty looks.

"Whoever heard of a newspaper man being enthusiastic?" I said, and hurried off for a chat with Julius Cole.

chapter nine

I paid off the taxi outside Mrs. Crockett's residence, looked up at the building. There was a light showing in both the first floor and second floor flats; the top flat was in darkness.

I had intended to try if I could find out something more about Julius Cole, but when I saw the lighted windows of the first floor flat, I changed my mind and decided to call on Madge Kennitt instead. I wondered if the police had questioned her. If they had and learned nothing, then I was wasting my time. I could always go upstairs to see Julius Cole if Madge Kennitt had nothing to tell me, I consoled myself.

I mounted the steps, opened the front door and entered the hall.

On the first landing, Madge Kennitt's door faced me. As I reached for the knocker I heard a faint sound from upstairs, looked up quickly. I was in time to see Julius Cole duck out of sight. I smiled to myself.

That guy missed nothing. I rat-tatted on the door, waited.

There was a long pause, then I head heavy thudding footsteps and the door jerked open.

A short, fat woman stood squarely in the doorway. She was around forty-five, and had a lot of face and chin. Her straw-coloured hair, brittle by constant bleaching was set in a ruthless permanent.

Her moist eyes were as sympathetic as marbles at the bottom of a pond, and her complexion was raddled with rouge and powder which failed to hide the purple bloom of a whisky soak.

"Good evening," I said. "Miss Kennitt?"

She peered at me, belched gently. A puff of whisky-ladened breath fanned my face. I reminded myself to duck the next time she did that.

"Who is it?" she asked. "Come in. I can't see you out there."

She stepped back into the hard light of the sitting room. I followed her. It was quite a room. The main piece of furniture was a reed chaise-longue by the window. It had a curved back and enough cushions to stuff an elephant. One side of the room was given up to dozens of empty bottles of whisky. Just to look at them gave me a thirst. Then there was a rickety table, a straight-backed chair and a well-worn imitation Turkey carpet on the floor. A bucket stood by the chaise-longue, three-quarters filled with cigarette butts. The smell of stale whisky, nicotine and cheap scent was overpowering.

By the empty fireplace a big black cat lay full-length. It was the biggest cat I've ever seen. Its long hair was silky: it looked in a lot better shape than Madge Kennitt.

I put my hat on the table, tried to breathe through my mouth, put on a friendly expression.

Madge Kennitt was looking at me in that puzzled way people have when they've seen a face before but can't place it. Then suddenly her eyelids narrowed, and a. sly smirk settled on her thick lips.

"I know you," she said. "I've seen you in and out there. It must be nearly two years since last you came. You're that Scott girl's friend, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I wanted to talk to you about her."

"Oh, did you?" She padded over to the chaise-longue, settled herself down on it like an elephant about to roll in the dust. "Now I wonder what you want to talk to me about her for." Her fat, doughy-looking hand dipped down on the offside of the chaise-longue and hoisted up a bottle of Scotch. "I have a bad heart," she explained, eyeing the bottle greedily. "This stuff's the only thing that keeps me alive." She carefully unscrewed the metal cap, hoisted up a dirty tumbler and poured three inches of whisky into it. She held up the bottle, inspected it against the light, grimaced. "I can't offer you any," she went on. "I'm running low. Besides I don't believe young men should drink for pleasure." She belched again, but I was well out of range. "It's a disgrace invalids like me have so much worry and trouble getting the stuff. Doctors ought to supply it to deserving cases." She looked at me out of the corners of her eyes. "And don't think I like it. I loathe the muck. I can hardly get it down, but it's the only thing that keeps me alive—I've tried everything else." She lowered two inches of the raw spirit down her thick throat, closed her eyes, sighed. For someone who hated the stuff, she took it remarkably well.

I sat on the straight-backed chair, wondered if I'd ever get used to the smell in the room, took out a cigarette.

"Have a smoke?" I asked, waving the carton at her.

She shook her head. "Only smoke my own brand," she said, hoisting up a vast box of Woodbines from behind the chaise-longue, selected one, lowered the box out of sight.

We lit up.

"Miss Kennitt," I said, staring at my cigarette and wondering how much to tell her. "Netta Scott was a friend of mine. Her death came as a great shock to me. I wonder if you know anything about it. I'm trying to find out why she did it."

The fat woman settled herself more comfortably, thumped her floppy bosom, belched gently.

"You were lovers, weren't you?" she asked, a sly smirk crossing her purple face.

"Does that matter?" I asked.

"It does to me," she said, sipped the whisky: "two young people making love reminds me of my own youth."

I couldn't imagine her ever being young or in love.

"Netta wasn't the loving type," I said, after a moment's hesitation as to how to steer her away from this topic.

"She was a sexy little bitch," Madge Kennitt said, winking at the ceiling. "You can't tell me anything I don't know."

I flicked ash on to the carpet, wished I hadn't ever met the hag.

"All right," I said, shrugging. "What does it matter? She's dead. Names can't hurt her."

"I wasn't good enough for her," the woman muttered, drained her glass, hoisted up the bottle again. "I thought she'd come to a sticky end. I suppose she was pregnant?"

"You know as much about it as I do," I said.

"Perhaps I know more," she returned, looking sly. "You've only just got back, haven't you? You don't know what's been going on here during the past two years. Mr. Cole and I know most things."

"Yeah, he doesn't miss much," I said, hoping to draw her. She shook her bleached head, poured more whisky into the tumbler.

"He's a filthy rat," she said, closing her eyes. "Peeping and prying all day long. I bet he knows you're with me now."

I nodded. "Sure. He saw me come in here."

"It won't do him any good. One of these days I'm going to tell him what I think of him. I'll enjoy that."

"Did the police ask you anything about Netta?" I asked casually.

She smiled. "Oh, yes, they asked questions. I didn't tell them anything. I don't believe in helping the police. I don't like them. They came in here, sniffing and prying; I could see they thought I was a drunken old woman. They don't believe I have a bad heart. One of the detectives, a cold, smug-looking brute, smirked at me. I don't like men smirking at me, so I didn't tell him anything." She poured more whisky down her throat, grunted. "You're an American, aren't you?"

I said I was.

"I thought so. I like Americans. Mr. Churchill likes Americans. I like Mr. Churchill. What he likes, I seem to like, too. I've noticed it over and over again." She waved her tumbler excitedly, slopped whisky on her chest. "What do you do for a living?"

"Oh, I write," I said. "I'm a newspaper man."

She nodded. "I was sure of it. I'm good at guessing professions. When I first saw you, coming in with that little slut, I said to myself you were a writer. Did she know how to make love? Some of these modern chits—especially the pretty ones rely on their looks. They don't know or care how to please a man. I knew. Men liked me. They were always coming back."

"Do you think Netta committed suicide?" I asked abruptly, rather sick of her.

She lay still, staring up at the ceiling. "They said she did," she

returned cautiously. "That's a funny question to ask, isn't it?"

"I don't think she did," I said, lighting another cigarette. "That's why I thought I'd talk to you."

She emptied her glass, put it on the floor beside her. It toppled over, rolled under the chaise-longue. I thought she was beginning to get a little tight.

"I don't know anything about it," she said, smiled to herself.

"Pity," I said. "I thought you might. Maybe I'd better talk to Mr. Cole."

She frowned. "He won't tell you anything. He knows too much. Why did he tell the police Netta came home alone? I heard him. Why did he lie about that?"

I tried not to show too much interest. "Didn't she come home alone?"

"Course she didn't. Cole knows that as well as I do." She groped for her bottle, hoisted it up, examined it. I could see it was a quarter full. "This damn stuff evaporates," she said in disgust. "A full bottle not an hour ago, and now look at it. How the hell can I go on hunting for the stuff if it goes like this?"

"Who else was with her?" I asked.

She didn't seem to hear, but leaned over and tried to find the tumbler.

"I'll get it," I said, bent down, hooked out the tumbler, handed it to her. Her reeking breath fanned my cheek.

I had a glimpse of an indescribable heap of rubbish pushed under the chaise-longue: dirty garments, shoes, cigarette cartons, crockery, old newspapers.

She grabbed the tumbler, clutched it to her.

"Who else was with Netta?" I repeated, kneeling at her side, looking at her intently. "Was it another girl?"

Her face showed surprise.

"How do you know?" she asked, lifting her head so she could see me. "You weren't there, were you?"

"So it was another girl," I said, a sudden tingling running down my spine.

She nodded, added, "And a man."

Now I was getting somewhere.

"Who were they?"

A look of cunning came into the glassy eyes.

"Why should I tell you? Ask Cole if you're so interested. He saw them. He sees everything."

I returned to my chair, sat down.

"I'm asking you. Listen, I don't think it was suicide. I think it was murder."

She had unscrewed the cap of the whisky and was pouring the spirit into the tumbler. The bottle and tumbler dropped out of her hands, rolled on to the carpet. She gave a thin scream, her face turned grey.

"Murder?" she gasped. "Murder!"

I made a dive for the bottle, but I was too late. The whisky poured out on to the carpet.

I stood over her. "Yes," I said. "Murder."

"I won't be frightened," she exclaimed, struggling to sit up. "It's bad for my heart. Here, give me that whisky. I want a drink."

"Then you'd better open another bottle," I said, watching her closely. "There's none left in this one."

"I haven't got another bottle," she wailed, sinking back. "Oh, God! What am I going to do now?"

"Aw, forget it," I exclaimed, wanting to shake her. "Who were the man and woman who came back with Netta? What time did they leave? Come on, this is important. They may know something."

She lay still for a moment, a great inert lump of flesh, then she looked at me, her small eyes cunning.

"How important is it to you?" she demanded. "I can tell you who the man is, and the girl, too. I know them. I can tell you what time the man left. I saw him. I'll tell you if you get me a bottle of whisky."

"I'll get you one," I said. "I'll bring you one tomorrow. Now, come on! Who were they?"

"I want one tonight - now." She clenched her fat hands into fists. "You can get one. Americans can get anything."

"Don't talk like a fool," I said, exasperated. "It's past eleven o'clock. Of course I can't get whisky tonight."

"Then I'm not telling you."

"I could call the police," I threatened, furious with her.

She smirked. "You wouldn't do that," she said, winking. "I'm on to you. You wouldn't want to get that little slut into trouble."

"Now, look," I said, controlling my temper with an effort, "don't be unreasonable. I'll get you the whisky tomorrow morning. I'll get you two bottles, and I'll give you right now five pounds if you'll talk. I can't be fairer than that."

She half raised herself on her elbow. Her face was now dark with frustrated fury.

"Get that damn whisky now or get out!" she screamed at me.

I got to my feet, moved across the room, back again. Then I remembered Sam, the barman at the Blue Club. He'd sell me a bottle of whisky if I made it worth his while.

"Okay," I said, turning to the door. "I'll see what I can do. But no fooling, or I'll drink the damn stuff myself."

She nodded, waved me away.

"Hurry!" she said. "I'll tell you what you want to know if you get it. Go on . . . hurry!"

I ran down the steps into the street, looked left and right for a taxi. There wasn't a sign of one. I decided it would be quicker in the long run to wait, so I stood on the edge of the kerb, kept watch.

It looked as if I was now on the right track. Netta had brought a girl back with her and I was willing to stake everything I owned that it was this girl who had died in Netta's flat. Who could the man be?

Netta's boyfriend? Someone else? Could it have been Julius Cole?

And who was the girl?

I suddenly felt I was being watched. I didn't look around immediately, but lit a cigarette, tossed the match into the gutter, then glanced over my shoulder. There seemed no one about, but for all that, I was pretty sure someone was tailing me. I thought of Frankie, wondered if he was going to have another try at beating my brains in.

I stood there for ten minutes or so before a taxi returning to the West End, drew up. I told him to take me to the Blue Club, and as we drove off, I peered through the rear window. I spotted a sudden movement.

Inspector Corridan stepped out of a dark doorway, stood in the middle of the pavement, looking after me. He glanced up and down the street as if hoping to find another taxi to follow me, but he was unlucky.

I grinned to myself. So Corridan had followed me to Madge

Kennitt's place. He wouldn't know I had visited her. He probably thought I had been to see Julius Cole. It looked as if Corridan was keeping an eye on me; did think I might be hooked up in this case.

A quarter of an hour later I arrived at the Blue Club. Ten minutes after that, I was trying to pick up another taxi back to Cromwell Road, the precious bottle of Scotch under my arm. It had cost me five pounds, but I hoped the information I was going to receive would be worth that and more.

When a taxi eventually turned up, my wrist watch showed eleven forty-five. I gave the address, sat back, relaxed.

The run to Cromwell Road seemed interminable, but in actual fact, it only took ten minutes. I paid off the taxi, noted that Madge Kennitt's light still burned, grinned to myself. I guessed the old hag was waiting as impatiently for the whisky as I was for the information.

I pushed open the front door and stepped softly across the hall, mounted the stairs, I didn't want Julius Cole to hear me. Madge Kennitt's door was ajar. I paused, frowned. I remembered closing it when I left. Maybe she had opened it to let the cat out, I thought, pushed the door, glanced into the room.

Madge was lying on the chaise-longue, her mouth open, her eyes

glassy. Blood welled from a great gash in her throat, poured down her floppy bosom on to the Turkey carpet.

She was as dead as a soused mackerel.

chapter ten

For a full minute I stood staring at Madge Kennitt too shocked to move, then I stepped into the room, stood over her.

Her sightless eyes glared up at me, the blood dripped steadily on to the floor. I turned away, weak at the knees.

Because I didn't know what to do, I wandered around the room, looking aimlessly for the weapon that had killed her. I couldn't find it.

I stepped to the chaise-longue, peered over the offside.

Three empty whisky bottles and the carton of Woodbines met my eyes. The dust on the floor-boards that side was thick; written in the dust within reach of Madge's hand which flopped lifelessly on the floor was a word. I moved closer, peered at it. It was badly written, and it seemed to me that Madge might have written it either when she was dying or just before the killer had struck. It took me a few seconds to decipher the scrawl. She had written on the floor in the dust the name: Jacobi. It meant nothing to me, but I stored it away in my mind for future reference.

I suddenly remembered Corridan. If he was still hanging about outside and decided to come in to see what I was doing, I'd be in a hell of a spot. I made a dive for the door, ran down the stairs, opened the front door. I looked up and down the street, but could see no one.

Across the street was a telephone box, and I hurried over, dialled Whitehall 1212, asked for Corridan.

While I waited, I glanced idly along the street. The headlights of a car appeared out of what seemed an alley, down the street on the opposite side to where I was telephoning. A moment later a car came swiftly towards me, went on towards the West End. As it passed under a street light, I recognized it. It was the battered Standard Fourteen and Frankie was at the wheel.

Before I could think anything of this, someone came on the line to say Corridan was out on patrol with a police car. I asked for them to get into immediate touch with him and to tell him to come at once to Mrs. Crockett.

"Tell him it's a murder," I said, hung up.

I didn't fancy waiting for Corridan in Madge's room, so I returned to the house, sat on the doorstep. While I waited, I did a little thinking.

I was at last getting somewhere. I'd have probably solved the whole business if Madge hadn't dropped her bottle of whisky; but I wasn't discouraged. I had found out that a girl had been in the flat with Netta, and I was positive that it was she who had died and not Netta. It seemed pretty obvious that she had been murdered, and I wondered

with a feeling of sick apprehension, if Netta had taken a hand in the murder. Could the man who had returned with Netta and the other girl be Jacobi, whoever he might be? Had he been listening to Madge and me talking, and had killed Madge before she could give me the information she had promised? Was that what Madge had tried to convey when she had scrawled the name in the dust? What was Frankie doing on the scene of the murder? How much was I going to tell Corridan? If he suspected me before, he had every reason for suspecting me still more now. I should have to handle him with care.

Corridan arrived in a fast police car in less than ten minutes. He jumped out of the car, ran up the steps before I could get to my feet.

"What's this, Harmas?" he snapped, his cold eyes searching my face. "What's happened?"

"Madge Kennitt's been murdered," I said briefly.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"I came to see her," I returned, told him briefly what had happened. "You saw me leave, Corridan," I went on. "I spotted you as I was driving away. Why were you tailing me?"

"It's just as well that I was, isn't it?" he returned curtly. "I'm beginning to wonder about you, Harmas. You're not making things easy for yourself, are you?"

"You don't think I had anything to do with her death?"

"You could have killed her, couldn't you?" he returned, shortly.

"Every time someone dies connected with this case, you appear on the scene. I don't like it. I've told you before to keep out of this, and I'm telling you again for the last time. This is no business of yours. Now, will you please understand that once and for all?"

"Hadn't you better take a look at Madge?" I said.

He snapped his fingers impatiently, went past me into the house.

Two plainclothes men followed him. I brought up the rear.

"Stay in the hall, please," he said to me, entered Madge's flat.

That settled it, I decided. Corridan could stew in his own juice.

From now on, I was going to work on the case and keep all my findings to myself. Then I'd surprise the lug when I'd solved it.

I sat on the stairs, lit a cigarette, waited.

I heard the three men moving about the room, and after a while one of the plainclothes men came out, went across the street to telephone.

When he returned, he glanced at me and I said, "How much longer do I have to wait here? I want to go to bed."

"The Inspector will want to talk to you," he returned, went into the room again.

I lit another cigarette, continued to wait.

The stairs creaked, and I glanced around. Julius Cole was coming down stealthily, holding the skirt of his yellow-and-black dressing-

gown in one hand, the other hand on the banister rail.

Looking at the dressing-gown I thought of the yellow-and-black Bentley, wondered if there was any connection.

"Hello, baby," he whispered, his eyes on Madge Kennitt's door.

"What's going on?"

"I'd have thought you'd have been on the scene before now," I said, scowling at him. "You'd better beat it. You're in the way, Fatso."

He came on, plumped himself down beside me, smiled his secret smile. I smelt perfume, drew away from him.

"Has something happened to the old hag?" he asked, rubbing his big, white hands together. "Has she lost something? Is it the police?"

"Someone cut her throat," I said brutally. "Odd you didn't see him arrive, or did you?"

"Cut her throat?" he squeaked, his face going slack. "You mean she's dead?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I said, staring at him. "She knew too much."

He was on his feet now, his mouth working, his eyes full of terror.

"You'll be next," I said, kidding him. "You know too much, too." I wanted to loosen him up, and then I was going to move in and take him to pieces, but I guess I punched him too hard. He bolted up the stairs before I could grab him. I heard him rush into his room, slam the door and shoot the bolt.

I hadn't expected quite such a reaction, but on consideration, I realized that he also had seen the man and girl return with Netta. He, too, stood a likely chance of getting his throat cut; and he knew it.

I got to my feet, undecided whether to follow him or not, when Corridan came out of the room. His face was grim.

"Now, let's hear some more from you," he said, planting himself before me. "How long have you known this woman?"

I frowned at him. "Why, I've only just met her. I told you I thought she might have seen something the night Netta was supposed to have died. I came here, talked with her, and she admitted she did know something. Then she upset her bottle of Scotch, wouldn't talk until I'd got her another. I got another from Sam at the Blue Club, but when I got back I found her dead. Someone had stopped her talking for good."

"It's lucky for you I saw you come out when you did," Corridan said coldly. "Even then, it still doesn't mean you couldn't have killed her."

"For God's sake, Corridan!" I exploded.

"You've brought it on yourself," he returned. "You are definitely on my suspect list."

"That's fine," I said bitterly. "After all the meals I've bought for you, too."

"Tell me exactly what she said," he ordered, watching me with uncomfortable intentness.

I couldn't avoid telling him the truth, although it irritated me to do so. It was his job to find out that Netta had come back with two other people, not to receive it as a gift from me.

He listened in silence, seemed very thoughtful by the time I had finished.

"There goes your suicide theory," I said, eyeing him. "I told you all along Netta didn't kill herself."

"I know," he said, looking up sharply. "If she didn't kill herself, then you might have a reason for stopping Madge Kennitt from talking. Thought of that?"

I just gaped at him.

"On the other hand it still could be suicide," he went on. "These two visitors could have left her after doing whatever they had come to do, and then she committed suicide. It depends on what time they left."

"Well, Julius Cole can tell you. He saw them too."

"I'll have a word with him," Corridan said grimly. "Will you walk to the corner with me?" I asked, remembering Frankie. "I want to check something."

He opened the front door without a word, and together we walked to the entrance of the alley from which the Standard had come. I struck a match, peered at a small pool of motor oil on the cobbles. It would seem from that that the Standard had been parked there for some time.

"Look at this," I said. "When I was trying to get you on the phone, I spotted a Standard car come out of this mews. There's some oil here that leaked from it. I should say it'd been standing there some time. I happen to know the car belongs to Jack Bradley. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Except you seem to know more about this case than I thought,"

Corridan returned. "How do you know the car belongs to Bradley?"

"I consulted my Ouija board," I returned.

"You're not in the position to be funny," he snapped sharply.

"How did you know?"

"Frankie was driving. I knew he was Bradley's stooge."

Corridan grunted. "You know a hell of a lot, don't you?"

"Do you know anything about Frankie?" I asked.

"We've been hoping to get our hands on him for some time, but he's a slippery customer, as well as a vicious one. He's on our suspect list for several robberies, but Bradley always turns up with a cast-iron alibi for him."

"Think he'd run to murder?"

Corridan shrugged. "He'd run to anything if it paid well enough."

As we retraced our steps to the house, I asked him if he had found any clues in Madge's flat.

"None," he said.

"You mean you haven't found one single clue?" I asked, startled, thinking of the name Jacobi written in the dust. "No," he repeated.

I had an idea, darted away from him, bolted into Madge's flat.

The two plainclothes dicks were together at the far end of the room, looking for finger-prints. I came in so quickly they weren't aware of me until I had reached the chaise-longue. I peered over the far side. The dust had been swept clean. The scrawled name, Jacobi, had vanished. I immediately thought of Julius Cole. Had he got in here while I was waiting for Corridan?

But I hadn't much time for thought as Corridan came into the room, his face dark with anger. I moved away from the chaise-longue, looked around the room.

"What the hell are you playing at?" he demanded. "You've no business in here. I'm getting tired of your behaviour, Harmas. It's got to stop. Why are you in here?"

I decided I wouldn't tell him about the name in the dust. Anyway, not until I had investigated the clue myself. I tried to look ashamed of myself, didn't succeed very well.

"There was a cat here," I said vaguely. "I wondered if it was still in the room."

"What the blazes has a cat to do with it?" he demanded, glaring at me.

I lifted my shoulders. "Maybe the killer took it away," I said. "That's a clue, isn't it?"

"He didn't take the cat away," Corridan snarled. "It's locked up in the other room. Any more bright ideas?"

"Well, I'm only trying to help," I said. "How about you and me calling on Julius Cole?"

"I'm calling on, him," Corridan said. "You're getting the hell out of here. Now see here, Harmas, I'm warning you for the last time. Keep out of this. You're lucky you're not charged with murder. I'm going to check your story and if it doesn't click, I'm going to arrest you. You're a damn nuisance. Now get out."

"If you listen carefully," I said, as I edged to the door, "you'll hear my knees knocking."

chapter eleven

As I was crossing the Savoy lobby to take the elevator to my room, I ran into Fred Ullman, crime reporter to the Morning Mail. We had met when I was in London during the war, and he had been helpful in advising me on angles for my articles on London crime.

He seemed as pleased to see me as I was to see him.

"We've just time for a drink," he said, after we had got through back-slapping and explaining what we were doing in the Savoy at this time of night. "I don't want to be too late as I have a heavy day before me, so don't start one of your drinking contests."

I said I wouldn't, led him into the residents' lounge, ordered whiskies, sat down.

Ullman hadn't changed much since last we met. He was a tall, lanky individual, and his most distinctive feature was the bags under his eyes. He was known as the Fred Allen of Fleet Street.

After we had chatted about the past, checked up on the activities of mutual friends, I asked him casually if the name Jacobi meant anything to him.

I saw surprise on his face, and his eyebrows went up.

"What makes you ask?" he inquired. "A couple of months ago that name was in every English newspaper. Have you just got on to it? "

I said I had. "I heard some guy talking, and he mentioned the name. I wondered if I was missing anything."

"I shouldn't say you're missing much," he said. "The affair is as dead as a dodo now."

"Well, tell me," I said. "Even if it's past news, I should know what's been going on."

"All right," he returned, sinking back in his armchair. "The business began when a rich theatrical magnate, Hervey Allenby, decided to do what a number of rich people were doing: buy diamonds and other precious stones against invasion or inflation or both. He bought heavily: rings, bracelets, necklaces, loose stones; stuff that could be easily carried, and of good value. He amassed a collection worth fifty thousand pounds. As he wanted to be able to put his hands on the stuff quickly, he kept the lot in his country house.

The purchase of these gems was kept secret, but after four years-three months ago-the news leaked out somehow or other, and before you could say 'mild-and-bitter,' the collection was pinched."

"Quite a nice haul," I said. The name, Hervey Allenby, made me prick up my ears. "Where was this country house?"

"Lakeham, Sussex, just outside Horsham," Ullman returned. "I went

down there to cover the robbery. The village is small, but attractive, and Allenby's house is just a half a mile beyond it. The robbery was a real slick job. The house was crammed with burglar alarms and police dogs, and the safe was a real snorter. The thief must have been an expert. The police remarked that there was only one man who could have pulled the job: a fellow called George Jacobi."

"Jacobi was known to the police then?"

"Oh, yes. He was one of the smartest thieves in the game, and had served several long sentences for jewel robberies. You remember Corridan? He was in charge of the robbery. We ribbed him in the Press. None of the boys like Corridan. He's too damn cocky, and we thought this was our chance to give him a roasting. He suspected Jacobi from the start, but Jacobi had such a cast-iron alibi that Corridan hadn't a hope of nailing him."

"What was his alibi?"

"He said he was in an all-night poker game at the Blue Club on the night of the robbery. The waiters and the cloakroom attendant swore they had seen him arrive. Jack Bradley and a couple of other men swore Jacobi played with them the whole night. Mind you, none of these fellows were what you could call reliable witnesses, but there were so many of them, the police knew they wouldn't be able to make their case stand up in court, so they dropped Jacobi and hunted elsewhere."

"Without success?"

"Not a thing. It was Jacobi all right. Corridan said he wasn't worrying. Sooner or later the thieves would try to dispose of the loot and he had a detailed description of every piece that was missing. As soon as the stuff came on to the market, he was going to pounce."

I grunted. "Yeah, I can hear him saying that. Did he pounce?"

Ullman grinned. "No. The stuff hasn't come on to the market yet. There's still time, of course; unless it's been smuggled out of the country. One of these days the case may open up again, and then it'll be front page news. I think the trouble was that Corridan's a shade too confident and the thieves a shade too smart."

"What happened to Jacobi?"

"He was murdered. A month after the robbery he was found in a back street, shot through the heart. No one heard a shot, and the police think he was killed in a house and dumped from a car. They haven't a clue to the killer, and I doubt if they ever will find him. The affair wouldn't have caused much excitement only they found, concealed in the heel of Jacobi's shoe, one of Allenby's rings. They tackled Bradley again, but couldn't shift him. There the matter rests, and that's as far as they've got."

"No clues at all?" I asked, lighting a cigarette and offering him the

carton.

He took a cigarette, lit up. "There was one important clue, although it didn't get them anywhere. The bullet that killed Jacobi had a peculiar rifling. The police reckoned it would be easy to identify the gun if they could only lay hands on it. The ballistic experts said the bullet had been fired from a German Luger pistol, and for some time they suspected one of the American troops of having a hand in the murder."

I immediately thought of the Luger I had found in Netta's flat. It could have been given to her by an American service man. Could that have been the weapon that had killed Jacobi? "They never found the gun?" I asked.

"No. I bet they never will, either. My guess is there were two men concerned in the robbery. Probably Jacobi did the actual job, and the other man lurked in the background, directing the operation. Most likely he was responsible for getting rid of the loot. I think the two fell out over the split and the second man killed Jacobi, and is sitting on the loot until it's safe to put on the market. Corridan favours this idea, too." Ullman finished his drink, glanced at his watch. "Well, I'd better be moving on," he said. "It's long past my bed-time." He got to his feet. "Although I haven't much use for Corridan as a man, I must say he's damned efficient, and I shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't get the stuff in the end. He's a surly customer, but he does deliver the goods. The trouble with him is he hates newspaper men. He thinks publicity gives the criminal too much knowledge of what is going on. His idea is to say nothing, to keep the criminal guessing, not even to report the crime, and in the end, the criminal will betray himself because he'll be over-anxious to know what the police are doing. It may be a good idea, but it doesn't suit the Press. I wish he wouldn't trample on my finer feelings. I could like the bloke if he had better manners."

I grinned. "Yeah," I said, "so could I. I'd like to steal a march on him one of these days. He's due for a shake-up, and I may be able to give it to him."

"Well, let me have a front seat when it happens," Ullman said, shook hands and went off to join the queue for taxis.

I returned to my room, undressed, put on a dressing-gown, sat in my armchair.

By the merest fluke I had got hold of what seemed to be the key to the puzzle.

Corridan, of course, had no idea that the Jacobi robbery had anything to do with the death of the girl in Netta's flat, Anne's suicide or the murder of Madge Kennitt. If he had seen the name Jacobi scrawled in the dust in Madge's room, he would have been on to the clue before me. But now I was holding the key to the problem, and he

was still floundering about trying to find out what connection Madge's murder had with the other two odd happenings.

Thinking it over, it now seemed certain that Netta, in some way or other, was involved in the Allenby robbery. The fact that a ring from the Allenby collection had been hidden in her jar of cold cream was suspicious, but coupled with the fact that her sister had a cottage close to the scene of the robbery and that Jack Bradley was watching me like a hawk seemed to tie her to the robbery without any doubt.

What of the Luger I had found hidden in her dress? Had Corridan checked it thoroughly? Had he discovered that it was the Luger which had killed Jacobi and was holding out on me? Or hadn't the Luger anything to do with the case? That was something I had to find out, and find out fast.

Where did the five thousand pounds worth of forged bonds come into the picture? Had Frankie been after the Luger and the bonds when he had attacked me? If he had been after the Luger and it was the gun that had killed Jacobi mightn't that mean that Jack Bradley owned the gun and he had killed Jacobi?

I lit a cigarette, wandered about my room. I was sure I was getting close to the solution of this business, but I still needed a little more information.

Should I tell Corridan what I had discovered? That was something that bothered me. With my facts he might clear up the whole business in a few days, whereas I might fool around for weeks and never get anywhere. I knew I should call him at once and tell him about finding Jacobi's name written in the dust. That was the one vital clue that'd open up the case for him. I even crossed the room to the telephone, but I didn't make the call.

After the way he had treated me, I wanted to get even with him.

The sweetest way I could do this was to crack the case, walk into his office and tell him how it was done.

I hesitated, then decided to give myself seven more days, and if I hadn't arrived at the solution by then, I'd turn the facts over to him and give him best.

Having made this decision, I got into bed, turned out the light, and lay awake for at least three minutes wrestling with my conscience.

chapter twelve

Soon after eleven o'clock the following morning, I called on J. B. Merryweather. I found him sitting at his desk, totally unemployed, although he did make a feeble effort to look immersed in his thoughts when he saw me come in.

"Hello," I said, drawing up a chair and sitting down. "Any news from Littlejohn?"

"Well, yes," he said, straightening his tie and sitting more upright; "I heard from him this morning. He's a good chap; gets on the job right away."

"That's what he gets paid for, isn't it?" I asked, produced my carton of cigarettes. I rolled one across his desk. He snapped it up, lit it. "What has he to report?"

“There is one thing," Merryweather said, rubbing his long red nose.

"Rather curious, rather interesting, I feel. I hope you'll think so too. It seems this woman, Mrs. Brambee, was the sister of George Jacobi, the jewel thief, who was so mysteriously murdered a month or so ago. You may have heard of the affair. Would that interest you?" He looked at me hopefully.

I didn't let him see I was more than interested. "It might," I said cautiously. "Anyway any information at this stage of the case may be useful. Anything else?"

"Littlejohns spent the night watching the cottage. After midnight a car arrived and a man spent two hours with Mrs. Brambee."

Merryweather picked up a sheet of paper, consulted it. "The car was a yellow-and-black Bentley. The man was tall, well-built, powerful, but Littlejohns was unable to see his face. It was a dark night," he added, apologetically.

I nodded. "Did he get the registration number of the car?"

"Certainly, but I've had the number checked and there's no record of it. It would seem it's a false number plate that is being used."

"Well, that's not bad for a beginning," I said, pleased. "It won't be wasting time or money for Littlejohns to stay down there." I went on to tell Merryweather about seeing Mrs. Brambee at the Blue Club. "You'd better pass that information to Littlejohns. It may help him. And tell him to get after the driver of the Bentley. I want him traced. No sign of a girl staying at the cottage?"

"No. Littlejohns proposes to visit the place in a day or so on some pretext or other. He has seen quite a lot of Mrs. Brambee in the village, and he proposes to let her get used to the sight of him before he calls. He knows his job all right, I can assure you of that."

I got up. "Okay," I said, "keep in touch. If anything breaks call me."

Merryweather promised he would, and I went to the elevator, rode down to the ground-level.

Well, that explained who Mrs. Brambee was, and to some extent why she was connected with the Blue Club. The pieces of the jig-saw puzzle continued to fall into place quicker than I had thought possible.

The past twenty-four hours had certainly been revealing ones.

I stood on the edge of the kerb, looked up and down for a taxi. A car swept around the corner, drove up to me fast, stopped with a squeal of brakes. For a moment I was startled: it was the battered Standard Fourteen.

Frankie sat at the wheel. A cigarette drooped from his lips, his greasy hat rested on his thin nose. He looked at me out of the corners of his eyes, a cold, vicious expression in them I didn't much like.

"Bradley wants you," he said in a nasal voice. "Get in the back and make it snappy."

I recovered from my surprise. "You've been seeing too many gangster movies, sonny," I said. "Tell Bradley if he wants to see me, he can call at the Savoy some evening, I'll try to be out."

"Get in the back," Frankie repeated softly, "and don't talk so much. You'll do yourself a piece of good if you come without a fuss."

I considered the proposition with some interest and not a little thought. It might be worthwhile hearing what Bradley had to say. I hadn't anything to do at the moment, and I was curious to meet Bradley again.

"Okay, I'll come," I said, opening the car door. "What's he want to see me about?"

Frankie engaged his clutch, shot the Standard away from the kerb so fast I was flung against the back seat. I sorted myself out, promised to smack his ears down should the opportunity arise, repeated my question.

"You'll find out," Frankie said, drawing on his cigarette.

I decided he imagined himself to be a real tough egg, admired his skill as a driver. He kept thirty miles an hour going all through the heavy traffic, weaving his way in between cars, missing fenders by split inches.

"Now did you like the way I shook you off the other day?" I asked pleasantly. "You weren't so smart then, were you?"

He took his cigarette from his mouth, spat out of the window, said nothing.

"And the next time you try to bounce a tyre lever on my head, I'll wrap it around your skinny neck and tie a knot in it," I went on less pleasantly.

"The next time I come after you, you skunk," he returned, "I'll make

a better job of it." He sounded as if he meant it.

That held me until we reached Bruton Mews, then I said, "Well, thanks for the ride, sonny. It's a pity they didn't teach you anything better than to drive a car at your approved school."

He looked me over, sneered. "They taught me plenty," he said, moving towards the club. "Come on. I ain't got all day to fool around with a peep like you."

I reached out, caught him by the scruff of his neck. He twisted, wrenched away, swung at me. There was nothing slow about his movements. His fist caught me flush on the chin. I back stepped fast enough to keep from falling, but I took plenty of the punch. It was meant to be a sockeroo, but late nights, physical wear and tear and underfeeding don't put iron into bones. It worried me no more than a smack with a paper bag.

I sank my fist into the side of his neck just to show him what a real punch felt like. He toppled over sideways, went down on hands and knees, coughed, shook his head.

"Tough guy," I sneered.

He shot at me like a plane from a catapult, reaching for my knees in a diving tackle. I side-stepped and reached for his neck, took it into chancery. He tried to get his hands where he could hurt, but I'd been through that stuff at school. I twisted him around and heaved him a little higher, then I took hold of my right wrist with my left hand and turned my right hip-bone into him.

I had my right forearm against his windpipe and all the strength of both my arms in it. He scratched at the cobbles with his feet, went blue in the face.

I eased off; slapped his mug three or four times, back and forth, put the heel of my hand on his nose and pressed. Then I let him go.

He sat down on the cobbles, blood running from his nose, his face the colour of raw meat, his breath whistling through his mouth. It must have been the toughest two minutes he'd ever experienced.

Tears came into his eyes. He put his sleeve to his face, sniffled: just a soft, yellow kid who thought he was tough.

I reached out, grabbed his collar, heaved him to his feet.

"Come on, Dillinger," I said, "let's see Bradley, and don't give me any more of that gangster spiel; you can't live up to it."

He walked ahead, staggering a little, holding a dirty handkerchief to his nose. He didn't look back, but I could see by the set of his shoulders he was crazy with rage and hate. I decided I'd keep an eye on this lad in the future. He might try sticking a knife in my ribs the next time we met.

He rapped on a door at the end of the passage, opened it, went in.

I followed him, found myself in a big luxuriously furnished room.

There was a built-in upholstered corner seat by the window, a black-and-chromium safe in the wall. There were some filing cabinets, a small bar, and the usual broad, heavy executive desk with the usual high-padded leather chair behind it.

Looking out of the window was a man in a dark lounge suit. He had grey hair and plenty of it. He turned. He was going on for fifty and his face was handsome in a dark heavy way. His eyes were slate grey, unfriendly.

I remembered him now. It was Jack Bradley. I had only seen him twice before and that was two years ago. I decided he had aged a lot since last I saw him.

"Hello, Harmas," he said, then caught sight of Frankie. His face set. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he snarled at Frankie.

"You're bleeding over my goddamned carpet."

"My fault," I said, taking out my cigarettes, selecting one. "Your boy made me nervous. I thought he was a tough egg. We fooled around together just to see how strong we were. It turned out he wasn't strong at all."

Frankie's lips twitched. He said three words; one of them obscene. His voice was not loud, but it was bitter.

Bradley took a step forward, snapped, "Get the hell out of here," to Frankie, who went.

I lit my cigarette, hooked a chair towards me with my foot, sat down.

"You'd better watch that boy," I said. "He's in need of a mother's care."

"Never mind him," Bradley said, frost in his eyes. "It's you I want to talk about."

"That's fine," I said. "I like talking about myself. Where shall we begin? Would you like to hear how I snitched the scripture prize when I was a little lad?"

Bradley leaned forward. "Frankie may not be tough," he said, "but I am. You'd better not forget it."

"That's scared me right through to my jaegers," I said. "May I go in a corner and cry?"

"I've warned you," Bradley said, sitting at his desk. "You're getting too inquisitive, my friend. I sent for you because I thought a little chat off the record might clear the air, I advise you not to pass this on to your friend Corridan. It wouldn't be healthy."

"You needn't worry about Corridan," I said. "He and I aren't pals anymore. What's biting you?"

He took a cigar from a silver box on his desk, pierced it, lit it, threw the match away, puffed it once or twice before he spoke again.

He took his time. He didn't rattle me. I was in no hurry myself.

“I don't like American newspaper men who are inquisitive," he said. "They annoy me."

"Are you suggesting I should relay that item of news to the U.S. Press Association?" I kidded him. "I doubt if they'd lose much sleep, but, of course, they might. You never know."

"You're sticking your nose into something that has nothing to do with you," Bradley went on smoothly. "I suggest you stop it."

"No harm in making suggestions," I returned lightly. "What exactly do you mean by that sinister 'something'?"

"We needn't go into that," Bradley said, a cold, angry gleam in his eyes. "You know what I mean. I'm serious about this. I'd advise you to return to your own country. There's a plane leaving tomorrow. It wouldn't be a bad idea if you were on it."

I shook my head. "I have a lot of work to do in this country," I said.

"I'm sorry I can't oblige you. Is that all you wanted to see me about?"

He studied his cigar for a moment, said, "I'm warning you, Harmas. If you don't keep your nose out of this, you're going to be taught a sharp lesson. I know what you newspaper men are like. You get keen on a story and you need a lot of persuasion to give it up. I have all the necessary persuasion but I'm not anxious to use it. I thought if I gave you the hint, you'd be a smart fellow and mind your own business in the future."

I stubbed out my cigarette in the copper ashtray on his desk, stood up.

"Look, Bradley," I said, leaning across the desk, "I've listened to your hot air because I wanted to hear how far you'd go. You and hundreds of other fat, sleek rats who've made money out of this war, sold stinking bad liquor to the Service men, and gorged yourselves with black market food are a gross a nickel in my country. I've knocked around and met real tough eggs, not jerks like you who merely smell strong. I've been threatened before, and the guys who've shaken their fists at me have ended up in a nice cool cell or are now fertilizing the soil. I'm not scared of you, or of your panty-waisted Frankie. I'm coming after you, and I'm keeping after you until I've had the satisfaction of knowing the hangman's taken your weight and height and selected a nice strong rope for you. Show me how tough you are, and I'll show you how tough I am. Keep Frankie out of my hair. He's too young for this kind of shindig. But if he does try anything with me, I'll paper a wall with him, and I'll paper another wall with you."

Bradley let me say my piece to the end. There was a faint flush on his heavy face and his fingers drummed on the desk, otherwise he was calm enough.

"All right, Harmas," he said, shrugging, "if that's the way you feel.

Don't forget I've warned you.”

I grinned at him. "I won't forget," I said, "but you'll find me a little harder proposition to take on than Madge Kennitt."

His face tightened. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I've never heard of Madge Kennitt. You can get out and stay out. This club's closed to you from now on. And take my tip — mind your own business, otherwise you'll be a sick PUP."

"Phooey!" I said, and left him.

chapter thirteen

On my way back from the Ministry of Reconstruction and Planning where I had been obtaining material for my third article, I ran into Corridan.

I spotted him hurrying along the crowded pavement, a dour, forbidding look in his eyes, his mouth set in a grim line.

"Hello, sour puss," I said, falling into step beside him. "You look as cheerful as the National Debt."

He scowled round, continued on his way.

"I never met such a chap," he said, stretching his long legs as if anxious to shake me off. "You're like a vulture. When anything happens or goes wrong, you're sure to appear on the scene."

My legs were as long as his, and I kept pace with him easily enough.

"What's wrong this time?" I asked brightly. "Anyone been humped off?"

"Nobody's been bumped off," he returned coldly. "If you must know that damned Julius Cole has skipped. He climbed out of his bedroom window and hooked it last night while I was trying to get in."

"I don t blame him," I returned. "Not after what happened to Madge Kennitt. I suppose he thought the same thing might happen to him. Any idea where he's got to?"

"No, but we shall find him. I want him for questioning, and a general alarm has gone out all over the country to bring him in. It won't take long, but it's a shocking waste of public money."

"Don't bother your head about that," I said. "There are plenty of other things to worry about. The great thing is to find him alive."

"I wish you'd stop dramatizing this business," Corridan snapped.

"You make it sound a damn sight worse than it is."

"I wonder," I shrugged. "By the way, how are you getting along with the Jacobi case?"

He misstepped, glanced at me sharply. "What do you know about that?" he demanded, slowing his pace.

"Oh, I've been following your remarkable rise to fame and fortune," I returned lightly. "A couple of months ago your face and name were spread over every newspaper in connection with Jacobi. Have you found the missing loot yet?"

He shook his head. "Plenty of time for it to appear," he returned curtly. "What makes you bring up Jacobi?"

"Oh, I've been consulting my Ouija board again. I thought it was a little odd that part of Jacobi's loot should be hidden in Netta's jar of cold cream. I wondered too, why you didn't tell me that the ring was

connected with such a sensational case."

Corridan smiled grimly. "I don't tell you everything. You appear capable of finding out most things for yourself."

I nodded. "That's so. You'd be surprised how much I do find out."

"Such as what?"

"I don't tell you everything either. One of these days I'll take you into my confidence and we'll have a good cry together."

He made an impatient gesture, looked around for a taxi.

"Have you wondered if the Jacobi affair has anything to do with Netta Scott and Madge Kennitt's murder?" I asked as the taxi, in answer to Corridan's hail, drew up.

"I'm always wondering about everything connected with all my cases," he returned dryly, climbed into the taxi. "I'll be seeing you, Harmas. You can leave all this safely in my hands. You may not think so, but they are extremely capable."

"Let's keep that as something between you and me," I said.

"Some people wouldn't believe it."

I watched him drive away, grinned, and continued on to the Savoy. So Julius Cole had gone to ground. I wouldn't be surprised, I thought, if I heard he had been found in a ditch with his toes in the air.

I entered the Savoy, asked if there were any messages, collected one from Crystal who suggested we should drink some more gin together that night, gave a telephone number and asked me to call her.

When I reached my room, I put through a call.

She answered immediately.

"Hello, this is your U.S. romance speaking to you from the Savoy Hotel," I said. "I received your note and think your suggestion an excellent one. Where do we meet and when?"

"Come and pick me up at my place," she said, gave me an address in Hertford Street.

"I thought you said you lived with your father-the guy who stuffs birds."

"Oh, I'm nearly as big a kidder as you are," she giggled, hung up.

I arrived at her flat a few minutes after seven. It was over an antique furniture shop, and after climbing red-carpeted stairs I came on a small landing which served as a kitchen.

Crystal popped her corn-coloured head out of a door close by, blew me a kiss.

"Go in there," she said, pointing a bare arm at another door. "I'll join you in two twos."

"Too long to wait," I said promptly. "I'm coming in here."

She hurriedly closed the door, said through the panels that she had on only her vest, and she didn't receive gentlemen dressed like that.

"Who told you I was a gentleman?" I demanded, pounding on the

door. "It's those sort of mistakes that gets a girl into trouble."

She had turned the key, but I could hear her giggling.

"Go into the sitting room and behave," she commanded.

"Okay," I said, went into the room, flopped down on the big settee. I thought the room was nice. It was comfortable, bright, full of flowers. The kind of room a man and a maid could get awfully matey in.

By my elbow was a table on which stood a bottle of whisky, a bottle of gin, a bottle of dry Vermouth, a soda syphon and a cocktail shaker.

I mixed two martinis, lit a cigarette, waited patiently.

Crystal came in after a while, wearing a scarlet house-coat, white mules and an expectant expression on her face.

"Here I am," she said, sitting beside me. She patted my hand, smiled.

I thought she looked a cute trick, gave her a martini, raised my own.

"May the bends in your figure never straighten," I said, drank half the martini, found it good. "So that stuff about your father was just a gag?"

"Not really. I have a father and he does stuff things, but I've given up living with him. I just couldn't stand it, and he couldn't stand me. I always tell my boy friends I live with him; it saves a lot of trouble when they want to see me home."

"How come I'm invited to your nest?" I asked, smiling. She fluttered her eyelids at me. "Well, if you must know, I have designs on you."

"My mother says no nice girls have designs on men."

"But who says I'm nice?" she returned, put down her glass, twined her arms around my neck.

We became intimate for the next five minutes, then I levered off her arm, pushed her away.

"Remember the News of the World," I said.

"I've got beyond the News of the World. Let's have some real ruinous fun." She put her head on my shoulder, draped my arm around her.

"In a little while," I promised, "but don't let's rush it. I meant to tell you: I saw Bradley this morning. For some reason or other he's taken a dislike to me. He won't let me into the Club anymore."

She sat up, her eyes indignant. "Why?"

I pulled her down, pushed her head back on my shoulder. "He thinks I'm too inquisitive," I said. "I don't care, so why should you?"

"I don't know if I want to go to the club again, if he's going to treat you like that," she said crossly. "Only I don't know what else I could do. You wouldn't think of keeping me, would you? I've always wanted to be a kept woman."

"I don't believe in keeping women. I think they should keep me."

"Oh, you're kidding again," she said, thumped my knee. "But seriously, wouldn't you like to keep me?"

"I'd hate it," I said gravely. "It's as much as I can do to keep myself."

She sighed. "Well, all right. I never seem to have any luck. I don't think I'll go to the club tonight. I have a chicken in the refrigerator. Let's have that and spend the evening together."

"That sounds swell."

She got up. "You sit there and look decorative. I'll fix supper."

That suited me. I was good at looking decorative. I filled my glass, lit a cigarette, relaxed. It was nice to watch her moving about the room. I decided suddenly that it mightn't be a bad idea to keep her at that.

"Tell me, sugar," I said, "have you been keeping your eyes and ears open at the club?"

"Oh, yes. The trouble is I don't know what to listen for. I'll tell you something though." She paused in laying the table, turned to look at me. "I was at the club this afternoon and an odd sort of man came in asking for Bradley. He reminded me a little of the man I saw with Netta — the one I was telling you about with the Bentley."

"Go on," I said, interested.

"I don't know if it was the same man, but he was the same build, and there was something familiar about him that rang a bell. He was big and fat and fair. I thought he looked a bit of a pansy."

"Had he a habit of wagging his head? Did you notice that? And was his hair cut very short?"

She nodded. "Do you know him?"

"It sounds like my old pal Julius Cole," I said. "What happened?"

"Well, Bradley came out of his office, glared at him, said, 'What the hell do you want?' This man said, 'I've got to see you, Jack, it's important'. Bradley looked sort of put out, then he took Cole into his office. I didn't hear what happened, of course."

I stubbed out my cigarette, lit another. "Think carefully. Did anything happen at all after that?"

"I saw Frankie go into Bradley's office, and later he came out and went to the garage. He spoke to Sam and said something about going down to the country right away. I could see he was wild with rage, but I can't remember anything else happening."

"You've remembered enough," I said, crossed over to the telephone, turned up Merryweather in the book. I found his private address, put through a call.

He answered himself.

"This is Harmas here," I said. "Can you get in touch with Littlejohns at once and warn him to look out for a man who's on his way to Lakeham?"

Merryweather said he could. There was surprise in his voice. He asked for a description, and I gave him an accurate picture of Julius

Cole. "He'll probably arrive in a Standard Fourteen," I said, gave the licence number. "Tell Littlejohns not to lose sight of him, even if it means taking his eyes off Mrs. Brambee. Cole is important. I guess he'll be staying with Mrs. Brambee anyway. Will you get on to that right away?"

Merryweather promised to call Littlejohns immediately, hung up.

Crystal was listening to all this, her eyes wide with interest.

"You know I get a thrill out of hearing your voice when you get businesslike," she said. "It's like being in a movie with Humphrey Bogart."

"You remember what Bogart did to Bacall?" I asked, advancing and making faces at her.

"I seem to remember it wasn't very polite," she said, backing hurriedly away.

I grabbed her, did what Bogart had done to Bacall, asked her how she liked it.

"I'd forgotten," she sighed, holding me close. "Much more, please."

I had a sudden idea. "Tell me, honey, did you ever meet a guy named Jacobi at the club?"

She shook her head. "You mean the one who was murdered? Oh, no, I didn't know him, but I knew his wife, Selma. She used to be one of the girls at the club before she married him. She was a sweet kid and crazy about George. I haven't seen her since he was killed. I don't know where she's living. I wanted to see her because I knew she'd be terribly cut-up at losing George, although he wasn't a great loss as far as I could see."

"Selma Jacobi," I said thoughtfully, "maybe she fits in this puzzle, too."

Crystal tightened her grip around my neck. "Could we forget all this just for a little while?" she pleaded. "I don't believe you care for me one little bit. All you're interested in is your horrid old puzzles."

"Not all the time," I said.

"Could we have a little fun this very moment?" she asked, pressed her lips on mine.

We had fun.

chapter fourteen

They were waiting for me as I came out of Crystal's flat. I guess I asked for it. I should have been on my guard after Bradley's threat, but the hectic couple of hours I'd spent with Crystal had numbed me, and I stepped into the dark street without the slightest suspicion of what was coming to me.

It happened so quickly that I could only give a strangled shout before something crashed down on my head and I blacked out.

I recovered to find myself lying on the floor of a fast moving car, an evil smelling rug over my head and shoulders, someone's heavy feet on my chest. My head ached, and the rug threatened to stifle me.

I lay still, tried to make out what had happened. I guessed this was Bradley's idea of teaching me to mind my own business. I wasn't happy, wondered where I was being taken, and if I was going to have my throat slit. Cautiously I moved my hands. They were free and so were my legs. Maybe whoever had cracked me on the head had underestimated the thickness of my skull.

The two feet lifted, thumped down on me again.

"Keeps quiet, don't he?" a voice said.

"I 'ope you didn't bash 'im too 'ard, Joe," another voice said.

"Not me," Joe said. "I only patted 'is 'ead with my fist. ‘ E'll be orl right once I tug 'is ears a bit."

I grimaced. Having my ears tugged was not one of my favourite pastimes.

"We oughter be there by now," the second voice went on. " 'Ere, Bert, 'ow much farther is it?"

"Just 'ere," the first voice said. "This'll do, won't it?"

"Yes, this is orl right," Joe said.

The car slowed, bumped over uneven ground, stopped. "Nice quiet spot wid no one to interfere wid us," Bert remarked.

Three of them, I thought. Well, three were better than four. I lay still, waited developments.

Boots trod on me; the car doors opened; feet scraped on gravel.

"Get 'im out, and be careful 'e ain't foxing," Bert said. 'Ere, Joe, you 'andle 'im. Ted and me'll stand by just in case 'e stares any funny business."

"I 'ope 'e does," the man called Joe replied. "I don't like bashing a bloke in cold blood."

I began to like Joe a little.

The other two laughed. "That's a good 'un," Bert sneered. "I ain't so particular, nor's Ted. Are you, Ted?"

"I'm looking forward to bashing the bugger," Ted said cheerfully. "I ain't 'ad any exercise for the past two weeks."

Hands grabbed my ankles. I was dragged bodily out of the car. My shoulders hit on the running-board, but I managed to keep my head clear as I thudded to the ground. I remained still, waited patiently for someone to take off the rug.

"You sure you didn't 'it 'im too 'ard?" Ted asked. " 'E's a bit quiet."

"But not for long, matey," Joe said. "Let's 'ave a look at 'im."

The rug was dragged off. I felt the cool night air on my face.

Cautiously I looked between half-closed lids. I could see three massive figures standing over me, stars and a dark sky above me, trees and bushes nearby. It seemed to me I was on some sort of common.

"Strike a match, Ted," Joe growled, bending over me, "and let's 'ave a look at 'im."

I tensed my muscles, waited.

The feeble flickering light from the match lit up Joe's broad, broken features. He looked like an all-in wrestler. He had the kind of puss you dream about after a lobster supper. He knelt beside me, took hold of my chin between fingers that felt like iron. I didn't dare wait any longer. Whipping back my knees and twisting sideways, I jack-knifed into him with my feet, catching him in the middle of his chest. It was like kicking a brick wall.

With a roar of rage and surprise, he shot over backwards.

I squirmed around, got up on my hands and knees.

One of the other massive shapes came at me. He leapt high into the air and descended feet first-the old, spectacular all-in wrestling pounce that looks so easy but isn't. I had a split second to get out of the way. I managed it, swung a wild punch at the man's head as he thudded into the soft soil a half a foot away from me. The guy's skull was made of stone, and I felt a jar run up my arm as my fist connected.

I was on my feet now. The third man had arrived with a crouching rush. He caught me on the shoulder with a half-arm swing that sent me spinning backwards. I steadied up, ducked a haymaker that started from his ankles, socked him in the left eye with everything I had.

I didn't wait to see the effect, but turned on my heel and scrammed across the thick grass.

The common was as flat as a plate, seemed to stretch for miles.

Apart from bushes and an occasional tree there was no cover, nowhere to hide. It looked as if my only chance of escape was to run and keep running. I dug my elbows into my sides, tore across the grass, hoped -I was in better condition than the other three.

Wild yells and oaths followed me, then silence. I ran on until I heard the car start up, then looked over my shoulder.

They weren't going to run after me. They preferred the easy way.

They were coming after me by car.

Although the grass was thick, it was quite possible to drive a car over it. I knew in less than a couple of minutes they'd be all over me.

I slowed down, but kept moving. I didn't want to be breathless when they did catch up with me, but I wasn't anxious to come to grips with them any sooner than I could help. My future didn't look too good. Maybe they wouldn't kill me, but they'd do the next best thing.

I thought of Bradley, waiting for these thugs to tell him what they had done to me, and I cursed him.

The car was only a few yards off now. Joe and Ted were hanging on, standing on the running-boards. As soon as they got within reach of me, they jumped off, and closed in on me.

I dodged Joe, ran in the opposite direction. Ted came rushing after me. I slowed, let him come up, then dropped on hands and knees. His knees cannoned into my side and he went head first into the grass. Before Joe got within reach I was off again, but this time Bert had manoeuvred the car so I was sandwiched between the car and Joe,

I wheeled around, waited for Joe who came at me, cursing and waving his arms. I ducked under them, straightened, caught him a clout on the end of his nose which sent him reeling back.

But I couldn't keep this dodging up forever. They would catch me in the end, and by that time I'd be so winded I'd be at their mercy. A big tree a few yards away decided me. I swerved past Bert who came lumbering up, ran across to the tree, set my shoulders against it, waited for them.

I had time to look around the expanse of ground. There was not a house or building to be seen, nor could I see any car lights to indicate a main road. The spot was as bleak and as lonely as a Welsh mountain.

The three men sorted themselves out, came forward, stopped before me.

As I surveyed them I thought the dying gladiator was a happy man beside me. I lifted my fists to show them they weren't going to have it all their own way, waited.

Bert and Ted stood to my right and left. Joe was in the centre.

"Now, chum," Joe said, drawing near, "we're gonna bash you, and then you're getting outa this country, see? If you don't, we'll collect you again and bash you some more, see? Arid we'll go on bashing you until you do go, see?"

"I get the idea," I said, watching them closely. "But don't blame me if you guys get hurt. I don't usually fight with guys below my weight and strength. It's against my principles."

Joe roared with laughter. "That's a 'ot 'un," he said. "We know 'ow to

take care of ourselves, matey. It's you who're going to get 'urt."

I had an uneasy feeling that he wasn't going to be far wrong. "Go on, paste 'im, Joe," Ted urged. "When you're through wid 'im I'll 'ave a go."

"There won't be much left of 'im by the time I'm through," Joe said, doubling his fists.

"I ain't particular," Ted said. "Just so long as you leave me something to work on."

Joe slouched forward, his bullet head low, his thick lips drawn off his teeth. He looked as attractive as a gorilla, twice as dangerous.

I waited for him in the shadow of the tree, glad the moon was behind me.

He kept coming, his big feet shuffling over the grass, making a slight swishing sound. He wasn't quite sure of me, didn't know if I could hurt him or not. He wasn't taking any chances.

"Don't take all night," Ted called impatiently. "I wanna go 'ome even if you don't."

"Don't rush him," I said, suddenly waving my arms, and made a move towards Joe, who cursed, stepped back, then darted forward, his left list shooting towards my heal. I slipped the punch, hit him in the ribs, swung a right to his jaw. He backed away with a grunt, came at me again. A haymaker whistled past my head, a left grazed my ear.

I uncorked a right that caught him in the throat, lifted him off his feet and stretched him flat on his back.

I blew on my knuckles, stepped back against the tree, looked over at Ted.

"You're next, son," I said. "I treat 'em all the same, no favouritism, no waiting."

Ted and Bert gaped at Joe, then, together, rushed at me.

I thought at least I've hurt one of the punks, hit Bert on the nose, collected a punch on the side of the head from Ted that made my teeth rattle. Bert flung himself on me, snarling, his great fists thudded into my body. He was quite a hitter. I felt as if Tower Bridge had fallen on me. I shoved him off, measured him, socked a couple of lefts into his flat, ugly puss. Ted came up, caught me with a right, and I countered with a left. Then suddenly a light exploded inside my head and I felt myself falling.

I came to a moment or so later. I was lying on the grass, someone was kicking my ribs very hard. I rolled away, tried to get up, but another lick sent me flat again.

I heard Joe bawling savagely, "Lemme get at him."

I had time to see him rushing at me, leap high into the air. I managed to twist sideways, grab his foot. He tried to pull away, but I had a hold. I turned his foot, wrenched it, threw my weight on it. I

had the satisfaction of hearing a bone go, and Joe's howl of pain, then a hand seized my hair, and a fist like a lump of iron crashed on my chin.

I felt myself rise in the air, and I landed on the thick grass with a thump that knocked the wind out of me.

I was now half crazy with rage, and struggled to get up, but found I hadn't the strength to support myself. I fell forward on hands and knees. A great crushing weight dropped on me and I went flat.

Although I knew what followed, I couldn't do anything to stop them, couldn't defend myself.

Two of them systematically beat me up. One dragged me to my feet, held me upright, while the other bashed my face and chest with his fists. They made a boxing sack out of me. When one got tired, the other took over. It seemed to go on for a long time. There was nothing I could do but take it. So I took it.

At last, they were through. They left me lying on my back blood running into my eyes, my body pulverized. I felt little pain. That would come later. At the moment, I could see the moon through swollen eyes, hear what was going on as if the sounds were coming to me out of a fog.

I was still half crazy with temper, and after a few minutes, I managed to hoist myself to my feet. I reeled around like a drunk, fell down again. My hand closed over a big round flint stone. That gave me a little incentive.

Crawling upon my hands and knees, holding the flint tightly, feeling its sharp edges digging into my fingers, I peered around until I located the three men a few yards from me.

Ted and Bert were giving first aid attention to Joe's ankle. It was nice to hear his curses as they probed the swollen member with their thick, unfeeling fingers.

I levered myself to my feet, swayed backwards, recovered, set out across the grass towards them. It took me a little time, and it was like walking against a strong wind. Ted heard me when I was a few feet away, turned.

"For crying out aloud!" he exclaimed, "I'll bust my mit on his ugly snug this time, s'welp me if I don't."

I found I couldn't get any farther, so I waited patiently for him to come to me. He sauntered up, flexing his right arm. Bert and Joe turned their heads to watch. Bert was grinning; Joe was snarling at me.

Ted planted himself in front of me, set himself.

"Now, chum," he said, "I'm about to demonstrate 'ow I put Little Ernie to sleep in the first round. If this smack you're going to run into don't take your 'ead off your neck, then may I be."

I collected all my remaining strength, shot the flint into his face as his right hand began to move.

The flint caught him an inch or so below his right eye, ripped his cheek open to the bone.

He gave a startled howl, stepped back, tripped and fell. He began to bleed into the grass.

That was about all I could do. I'd broken Joe's ankle and scarred Ted for life. It was a pity I couldn't do more for Bert, but I just hadn't the guts to stand any longer on my feet. I staggered forward, heard a violent oath from Bert, saw him rush at me.

I took his punch on the point of my jaw, went out like a snuffed candle.

chapter fifteen

Crystal was saying, "You may think it odd I should have married such a wreck, but he didn't always look like that. When we first met, he was almost handsome."

I opened my eyes, found I could scarcely see, stared up at the ceiling. There was a smell of antiseptics and flowers in the room. I felt as if I'd been run over by a steam-roller, but the bed felt fine.

A woman's voice said, "You may sit with him for a little while, Mrs. Harmas. He should recover consciousness any moment now, but please don't excite him."

Crystal said airily, "Oh, we're old married folk now. He doesn't get excited when he sees me, worse luck."

A door shut, and Crystal, looking cute in a blue and white check frock and a white turban, moved into my vision. She drew up a chair, began to put her bag on the bedside-table.

I reached out, pinched her. She gave a sharp squeal, jumped, turned.

"I've recovered consciousness," I announced.

"Oh, darling, you gave me such a fright," she exclaimed, furtively rubbed the spot where I'd pinched her, "and you really shouldn't do a thing like that. It's very uncouth." She took my hand, fondled it, looked down at me with adoring eyes. "I've been so worried about you, precious. You've no idea. I've been simply frantic."

"That makes two of us," I said, squeezing her hand. "I've been simply frantic, too."

"Oh, Steve, I do seem to love you," she said, kneeling beside me, and rubbing her cheek against my hand. "Whatever's happened to your poor face?" She blinked back tears.

I struggled up in bed, grimaced as pain rode through me, looked around the room. It was obviously a private ward in a hospital. I sank back with a grunt of disgust.

"How did I get here?" I demanded, "and how did you find me?"

"Now, you mustn't excite yourself, darling," she said, patting my pillow. "A very kind, thoughtful man telephoned me. He found you on Wimbledon Common, discovered my telephone number in your wallet, called me and an ambulance, and here you are. But, please, Steve, what happened? Whoever did this to you?"

I ran my fingers tenderly over my face, grimaced.

"I had a fight," I said. "Some thugs picked on me and this is the result."

"But why should they pick on you?" Crystal asked, her eyes opening.

"You're such a nice boy. Did you say something to annoy them?"

"I guess I must have done," I said, deciding that it wouldn't add to her peace of mind if she knew Bradley was at the back of this. "What was that you were saying about being Mrs. Harmas?"

She looked embarrassed. "Oh, dear, did you hear me?" she returned. "Well, it was the only way I could get in to see you. You're not angry, are you, precious? We can always get divorced when you're better, can't we?"

I patted her hand, tried to smile, but my muscles were too stiff.

"That's okay with me," I said. "If I was the marrying type, I couldn't think of anyone I'd like to marry better than you - if I was the marrying type."

She nodded, looked bitter. "That kills me — if you're the marrying type! Maybe, you'll have to marry me."

"Don't let's get sordid," I said hurriedly. "Tell me, how long have I been here?"

"Two days."

I moved my legs and arms. After the first twinge of pain, they moved easily enough.

"Well, I'm not staying here any longer. I must get up and out of this."

"You'll do no such thing," Crystal said firmly. "There's no question of you getting up until you're quite well."

"Well, okay. That's something we can argue about when we run out of conversation," I said. "Do the police know what's happened to me?"

She nodded. "I'm afraid they do. You see the hospital reported your arrival. There's been a great, hulking policeman sitting by your bed since you came. I managed to persuade him to wait outside this time. He's out there now."

"Wants a statement, I suppose," I said. "Well, maybe you'd better send him in. We can't keep the Law waiting, can we?"

She looked uneasy. "He worries me. I don't think he believes we're married."

"That shows he's a good cop, but I'll convince him. Tell him to come in, honey, and stick around. You do me good."

"Do I really?" Her face brightened. "I'm so glad. I was beginning to think I was bad for you." She bent over and kissed me tenderly.

I patted her.

"Get the cop, sweetheart, or I'll be dragging you into bed."

"You wouldn't have to drag me," she returned, went to the door.

I heard men's voices, then Corridan entered, followed by Crystal who looked scared.

"I didn't ask him in," she said, hurriedly. "He was outside with the other man."

Corridan came over and stood looking down at me. A fatuous smile lit his dour face. It was the first time I'd ever seen him look really happy.

"Well, well," he said, rubbing his hands. "They certainly made a mess of you, didn't they?"

I scowled at him.

"What do you want?" I asked irritably. "You're the last person I hoped to see."

He drew up a chair, sat down, positively beamed at me.

"I heard the news," he said, "and couldn't resist coming to gloat. You've turned up enough times when I've been in trouble, you vulture, now it's my turn." He was oozing with happiness and geniality. "Who's the young lady?"

Crystal made frantic signs to me behind his back, but I pretended to ignore them.

"She's my cousin twice removed," I said. "Maybe, it's three times removed. I've never stopped to work it out. Crystal, my dear, this handsome looking lug is Inspector Corridan. He works at Scotland Yard, and you know what I mean by the word 'works'."

Corridan lost a little of his sunny smile.

"The last time I saw her," he said tartly, "was in your room at the Savoy. You told me then she was the floor waiter's daughter."

"That could still make her my second or third cousin," I pointed out, smiled at Crystal, who was looking bewildered. "Don't let the Inspector make you nervous. Without his wig and false teeth, he's really quite a kindly old thing."

Corridan lost his smile, fixed me with a cold stare.

"You take your idea of a joke a little too far, Harmas," he said with asperity.

"Don't get annoyed, pal," I said. "I'm not in a fit state to be bullied."

Crystal sat in a corner away from us, folded her hands in her lap, tried to look demure.

Corridan leaned forward. "Let's cut out this fooling," he said.

"Who's been knocking you about?"

I sighed, hung my head. "I was teasing a midget, and he lost his temper," I said, closed my eyes.

Crystal sniggered, coughed, cleared her throat. Corridan looked annoyed.

"Now look, Harmas, that sort of thing won't do. You've caused a lot of trouble, and we want to know what's behind it."

"I've told you," I said, patiently. "At least, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it. I have no complaints to make. I shall pay the hospital fees. I really don't see why a flock of flatfeet should come barging in here to know why and what."

Corridan breathed heavily, shifted in his chair.

"You've been assaulted," he explained. "That is a police matter. It is your duty to file a complaint."

"I'm most certainly not going to provide police with work," I said crossly. "I stuck my neck out, and I got what was coming to me. This is a personal matter, and I don't want you or your pals horning in. So forget it."

Corridan studied me for a moment, shrugged. "All right," he said, "if you're still suffering from I'll-steer-my-own-boat complex, there's nothing more to be said. If you're not going to file a complaint that lets me out." He pushed back his chair, stood up. "I think I warned you to keep out of this business, didn't I? It would seem someone else is also trying to persuade you. If this has anything to do with the Kennitt murder, you must tell me who did it or take the consequences."

"I'll take the consequences," I said flippantly.

Corridan snorted. "Has this or has this not anything to do with the Kennitt murder?"

"I wouldn't know. The thugs who beat me up didn't leave their names and addresses."

"So it's thugs now?"

"That's right. I was kidding about a midget. You know me: I'm tough. Takes more than a midget to beat me up. Those guys were twice as big as Joe Louis. Twelve of them set on me and I fought them for two or three hours. And what a tight I gave them! I laid eight of them out-crying for mercy they were. The other four kept coming and I kept hitting them. The siege of Stalingrad was nothing to it. Finally paused as Corridan, giving me an awful look, stamped out of the room.

Crystal ran over to me.

"Oh, you shouldn't have annoyed him like that," she said, shocked. "He might get you into trouble."

I reached out, pulled her down beside me.

"That wouldn't worry me, honey," I said. "The guy's harmless enough, but dumb."

"I don't like him," Crystal said, putting her head on my shoulder. She hurt me, but it was worth it. "I don't like the way he looks at me."

"And just how does he look at you?"

"That's something a girl could only tell her mother," she replied primly.

A few minutes later a nurse came in. Crystal had heard her coming and was standing by the window, trying to look unruffled and not succeeding very well. The nurse shooed her away, then took my pulse, dabbed something on my bruises and told me to go to sleep.

Oddly enough, I didn't seem to need much encouragement, and I

didn't awaken until dusk was falling. I felt better, got out of bed, walked stiffly across to the mirror on the wall, examined my features with mixed feelings.

I certainly looked a great deal worse than I felt. I had two black eyes, the end of my nose was red and swollen, two livid bruises showed on my cheek-bones, my right ear was puffy. My chest and arms were black with bruises. The three thugs had certainly done a good job on me.

I returned to my bed, stretched out, decided I wasn't quite fit enough to start any trouble for the time being. In a day or so I should be ready for Bradley. I was going to surprise that rat.

I heard footsteps, followed by a knock on the door. I called; "Come in," hopefully, half sat up.

The door opened and a sad looking little man wandered in. I gaped at him, scarcely believing my eyes. It was Henry Littlejohns.

"For the love of mike!" I exclaimed, struggling upright. "What brings you here."

"Good evening, Mr. Harmas," he said, in his sad voice. He looked around for somewhere to park his bowler hat, laid it down on the chest of drawers, came farther into the room. "I'm indeed sorry to find you in this unhappy state, sir," he went on, visibly shocked at my appearance. "I trust you are making a good recovery?"

"Never mind all that stuff," I said, impatiently. "I'm fine. Sit down. Make yourself at home. I thought you were in Lakeham."

"So I was, sir," he said, drawing up a chair and sitting down. He pulled up his trousers so they shouldn't bag at the knees, fidgeted with his feet. "At least, I was until this afternoon."

I saw he wasn't at ease, offered my carton of cigarettes.

"No, thank you, sir," he said, shaking his head. "I don't smoke." He regarded me with his sad eyes, chewed the end of his moustache.

"Something to report?" I asked, wondering what was coming.

"Not exactly, sir," he said, drumming on his knees. "I don't suppose you've heard from Mr. Merryweather yet?"

"I've heard nothing from Merryweather," I said, puzzled.

"Anything wrong?"

Littlejohns stroked his greying hair, looked self-conscious. "The fact of the matter is, sir, Mr. Merryweather has withdrawn from your case."

"The hell he has," I said, sitting bolt-upright, and wishing I hadn't.

"What's the idea?"

"You see, sir, Mr. Merryweather at no time thought the investigation within our usual terms of reference," Littlejohns explained. "The – er - pecuniary aspect of the case interested him— tempted him, you might say, but he now has been threatened - well, he thinks there'll be no

useful purpose served in continuing the investigation."

I pricked up my ears. "Threatened?"

Littlejohns nodded gravely. "Apparently two men visited him yesterday morning. They were rough characters, and they made it clear that if he did not immediately stop working for you, they would settle his hash, I believe was the phrase used."

I lit a cigarette, scowled. It seemed Bradley was working overtime.

"You mean Merryweather allowed these two guys to throw a scare into him?"

"They were exceptionally rough characters," Littlejohns said hurriedly, as if anxious to excuse Merryweather's lack of courage. "They smashed his desk, said they had beaten you up and would beat Merryweather up too. He isn't exactly young, and he has a wife to consider. I can't say I blame him for withdrawing, and I hope, sir, you'll take the same view."

He looked so solemn that I burst out laughing.

"That's okay," I said, lay back on my pillow and grinned at him. "I bet they scared the daylight out of the poor old geyser. I don't blame him in the least. They nearly, but not quite, scared the daylight out of me." I looked at him, suddenly puzzled. "But why did you come here to tell me all this? What's it to do with you?"

Littlejohns pulled at his moustache. "I'm very sorry to be taken off this case, sir," he said. "Very sorry. You see, sir, I liked the excitement. You may not believe it, but I've always wanted to be a detective ever since I was a nipper. I've been disappointed with the work up to now. Mr. Merryweather doesn't get much business. The cases that do come our way are the usual divorce cases. Not, as you will appreciate, very congenial work: very dull, if I may say so. I dislike spying on married couples. But I have to do the work. I'm not getting any younger; jobs are difficult to come by. I thought I'd explain my position, sir. I hope you'll forgive me taking up your time. What I was going to suggest . . ." He paused, looked embarrassed. "If you'll excuse the liberty, what I was going to suggest was that I should continue with the case. I'd be very happy to take reduced fees, and Mr. Merryweather has nothing for me at the moment. He pays me only when I'm working for him. So I thought I'd offer my services, not that you'd want to continue the arrangement, but I thought there'd be no harm in mentioning it."

I gaped at him. "But, look, if they're threatening Merryweather, that'll also include you."

"I don't believe in being intimidated by threats," he said quietly. "I assure you I wouldn't be put off by that kind of thing. I'm at your service if you still require me."

I grinned at him, suddenly liking him immensely. "Sure, you go ahead. The same terms suit you?"

He gaped, stuttered. "Oh, but surely, Mr. Harmas, they were rather excessive. I would be prepared . . ."

"No, you'll have what Merryweather got, so dry up," I said firmly.

"Don't make any mistake: you'll earn the money. There are a number of things to do with this case that I haven't told your boss. I'm going to tell you, and you can then decide if you still want the job."

"Thank you, sir," Littlejohns said, his face lighting up. "There is one thing I must report first. I've seen the young lady with the red hair. She came out of the cottage late last night. The black-and-yellow Bentley called for her. I saw her distinctly. She got into the car which drove away along the London road; I was unfortunately too late to follow it."

"Okay," I said. "Perhaps she's decided to come to London. Well, keep an eye on the cottage for a little while. Now, listen to what I have to say."

I told him the whole story without pulling my punches down to Madge Kennitt's murder and the attack on myself. I told him about Jacobi, Selma, his wife, about Bradley and Julius Cole going to the club.

"That's about the lot," I said. "These guys are a tough bunch. You'll have to watch your step."

He scarcely seemed to hear me.

"I'm glad you've taken me into your confidence, sir," he said, getting to his feet. "I think I'll have something for you in a day or so. I would rather not discuss it now, but something you said just now has given me the clue I've been looking for. "I'll get in touch with you very soon."

"Hey!" I called as he picked up his hat and made for the door.

"What about Julius Cole? Has he arrived at Lakeham?"

"He arrived three nights ago, and is staying with Mrs. Brambee," Littlejohns said, opening the door. "I'll have something for you in a day or so."

He didn't wait for me to tell him again to be careful.

chapter sixteen

Two days later, still considerably bruised and battered, but with all my old vigour back and a sharp edge to my temper, I returned to the Savoy.

Crystal was there to welcome me. The room was cluttered up with a mass of flowers and smelt like a florist's. There was a bottle of champagne in a bucket, and it only needed a brass band and the Lord Mayor to complete the homecoming atmosphere.

"Darling!" Crystal exclaimed, throwing her arms around my neck and doing her best to strangle me. "Welcome home!"

"Who's paying for the champagne?" I demanded, removing her arms.

"You are, precious," she said brightly. "Let's open it and drink your health. My poor little tonsils are withering for a drink."

"Not at seven pounds a bottle we won't," I said firmly. "That goes back to where it came from. I suppose I'm paying for all these flowers too?"

"I knew you wouldn't mind," Crystal returned slipping her arm through mine and pressing her face against my shoulder. "I'll take them home if you don't like them, but you'll have to pay for them as I'm a little short right now. They do make the room look lovely, don't they?"

"Sure, but what are they going to do to my bank balance? This is as bad as being married. Now, suppose you sit down and let me look through my mail. I've been out of circulation for the past four days. I shall have some catching up to do."

"Oh, there's plenty of time for that," she said. "Aren't you glad to see me? You haven't even kissed me yet."

I kissed her. "There, now sit down and keep quiet for a moment."

"I do love you, Steve, in spite of your poor battered face," she went on, sitting down. "But I do wish you were a more romantic type."

"It's nice of you to call it a face," I said, glancing into the mirror, grimacing. "Sorry about being the wrong type. You'd better get in touch with Frank Sinatra if that's the way you feel."

She lifted her shoulders in a hopeless shrug. "At least I haven't any competition," she said. "That's the only_ advantage a girl gets in going around with a fish like you."

"One of these days, when I have the time, I'll prove to you I have blood and not warm water in my veins," I returned, smiling at her. I picked up my mail, sorted through it. I read the letter from Merryweather, full of apologies, but withdrawing from the case with pathetic determination. There was a note from Corridan,

congratulating me on my recovery, hoping I would soon be going home, and again advising me, now that I was lucky to be still alive, not to interfere with what was obviously not my business. I tossed the letter into the wastepaper basket. The rest of my mail was from America and needed immediate attention.

I shooed Crystal out, promising to meet her that evening, sat down and worked solidly until lunch time.

After lunch, before settling down to the fourth of my articles on Past-War Britain, I turned Jack Bradley up in the telephone book, found he had a flat in Hay's Mews. I noted the address, closed the book with a vicious bang. Sometime during the night, I proposed to call on Mr. Bradley, and he was going to remember my visit.

In the evening I met Crystal and we had supper together at the Vanity Fair.

She was looking enchanting in an ice-blue evening gown which she said had been a reward for a strictly one-sided wrestling match with one of the club's patrons. I tactfully didn't ask her who had won.

"That horrible policeman friend of yours was in the club this afternoon," she said after we had worked through an excellent veal escalope.

"You mean Corridan?" I asked, interested.

She nodded. "He spent half an hour with Bradley, and on his way out, he passed me and said I was to be sure to tell you I had seen him because you like to know what was going on, and to say that curiosity killed the cat."

I laughed. "The guy's getting to be quite a kidder. Now, I wonder what he wanted with Bradley? Have you ever seen him in the club before?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. Policemen never come to the club as a rule. Bradley was furious as he showed Corridan the door. Corridan must have said something frightfully rude because Bradley never shows his feelings."

"One of these days I too am going to say something frightfully rude to Mr. Bradley," I said grimly.

She put her hand on mine. "You won't do anything silly, precious, will you?"

"I never do anything silly except make love to you."

She glared at me. "You don't call that making love, do you?"

"I don't know what else you call it. I was under the impression that we were on intimate terms."

"One of these days I'll forget I'm a lady," she said darkly, "then you'll know what being on intimate terms really means. It'll be an experience you won't forget in a hurry."

"Hastily changing the subject," I said, patting her hand, "have you

heard anything from Selma Jacobi?"

She sighed. "Here it comes," she said, shaking her head. "More questions. I don't know why I bother to waste the best hours of my life in your company. I haven't heard anything from Selma. I don't suppose I ever shall. I expect she's started an entirely new life. Sometimes I think it'd be a good idea if I did the same thing."

"Never mind about your life for a moment," I returned. "Let's concentrate on Selma. Has she any friends? I mean, close friends who might know where I could find her?"

"You're not going to chase her, are you?" Crystal demanded, her eyebrows shooting up. "She simply isn't your type. She'd bore you in five minutes. You can't do better than stick to me. After all I'm your first and only love."

"This is strictly business, honey," I said patiently. "I'm trying to solve a murder case. If I could talk to Selma I think I could get somewhere. Do you know any of her friends?"

"I love that line about being strictly business. It's the hammiest of them all. But I suppose you'll go on and on until you wear me down so I'd better tell you. There is one fellow who was awfully keen on her at one time, and before George Jacobi turned up they were always going around together. His name was Peter French."

I rubbed my chin, stared at her. Peter . . . could he be the Peter Mrs. Brambee had mentioned.

"Do you know where he hangs out?" I asked.

"He runs a garage in Shepherd Market," Crystal told me, went on to give me the address. "He's often told me if I want any petrol I could get it from him. That's the sort of man he is-he knows I haven't a car."

"You're quite helpful in your dizzy way," I said. "Remind me to reward you when we're alone."

After dinner I put Crystal in a taxi as she had decided reluctantly that she had better show up at the Blue Club, and then I walked around to Shepherd Market, only a few minutes from the Vanity Fair.

French's garage was in one of the back alleys of the Market. It was merely a large concrete wilderness, equipped with a bench and a pit, and didn't look the kind of place that made money.

I wandered up. Two men in soiled dungarees, lounging at the open doors, regarded me without interest. One of them, a short fat guy, bald as an egg, took a cigarette butt from behind his ear, lit it, dragged down smoke. The other, younger, his face and hands smeared with oil, eyed the butt vacantly, rubbed his shoulders against the wall.

"Mr. French around?" I asked the baldheaded guy.

He eyed me over. "Who shall I say?" he asked. "I don't know if 'e's in or out."

I grinned. "Tell him I've been recommended by the Blue Club, and

I'd be glad if he could spare me a moment."

The baldheaded guy wandered into the garage, disappeared up some stairs at the back.

"You keep open late," I said to the young fellow.

He grunted. "We ain't as late as this usually, but we're waiting for a job to come in."

After a few minutes, the fat guy came back.

"Upstairs, first door on the right," he said.

I thanked him, skirted a pool of oil, walked across the vast expanse of dirty concrete. Halfway across, I paused. In the far corner of the garage stood a magnificent yellow-and-black Bentley. I hesitated, made a move towards it, glanced up to find the baldheaded guy watching me.

"Some car," I said.

He continued to stare at me, said nothing.

I memorised the number plate, wondered if it was the same car that Littlejohns had seen at Lakeham, and that Crystal had said belonged to Netta's mysterious boyfriend. I thought it was too much of a coincidence not to be, walked up the stairs, repeating the number in my mind. I rapped on the first door on my right, heard a man's voice call, "Come in."

I pushed open the door, walked into a big room so luxuriously furnished that I came to an abrupt stop. A fine Chinese carpet covered the centre of the floor; polished boards that really were polished, set off the surrounds. A big desk stood by the window, comfortable and inviting armchairs were dotted about the room. The drapes and colour scheme were bright and modern. It was an extraordinary contrast to the filthy garage downstairs.

A man stood with his back to the vast brick fireplace, a cigar in his thick fingers, a large brandy inhaler on the mantelpiece within reach.

He was around thirty-five, dark, bulky, big. He looked a foreigner, was probably a Jew. His black hair was parted in the centre, grew back from his narrow forehead in two hard, set waves. His black eyes were like sloes, his complexion like the underbelly of a fish. He looked impressive because he was so well-groomed, so poised, so obviously well-to-do, confident in himself and his money.

He eyed me over without much enthusiasm, nodded. "Good evening," he said. "I didn't get your name. It was something to do with the Blue Club, wasn't it?"

"I'm Steve Harmas of the New York Clarion," I said. "Glad to know you, Mr. French."

His eyelids narrowed a trifle, but he shook hands, waved me to a chair.

"Sit down. Have a cigar." he said, "and this brandy isn't exactly

poison." He gave a depreciatory smirk, added, "I pay eight pounds a bottle for the damn stuff, so it can't be too bad."

I said I'd sample the brandy, but preferred a cigarette to a cigar.

While he was pouring the brandy into an inhaler, I studied him.

I remembered Crystal's description of the man in the yellow-and-black Bentley. It fitted French well enough. He was more likely to be the owner of a car like that than Julius Cole. I couldn't imagine Netta going around with Cole, but I could see her being fascinated by this guy.

"Nice little place you have here," I said, accepting the inhaler.

"Comes as a surprise after the garage."

He smiled, nodded. "I believe in comfort, Mr. Harmas," he returned. "I work long hours, spend most of my life in this room. What's the point in not having nice surroundings?"

I agreed with him, wondered if I should make a direct approach or get around to it more cautiously.

"Your bruises are a little too obvious to ignore," he went on, regarding me with friendly curiosity. "If a fellow has a black eye, I don't pass remarks. Probably his girlfriend has lost her temper with him; but when a fellow has two black eyes and the rest of his face resembles a rainbow, I feel it'd be unsympathetic not to offer condolences."

I laughed, "That's swell of you," I said, "and you're not the only one as you can imagine. A good newspaper man, Mr. French, has to be inquisitive. He can't afford to mind his own business. Three powerfully built gentlemen didn't like my methods. They pooled their muscles and attempted to alter the shape of my face, with some success, as you can see."

He raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips. "I do see," he said. "I must say I should be distinctly annoyed if anyone did that to me."

I nodded. "Oh, I'm annoyed all right, but I didn't come here to talk about my face. I came because I thought you might be able to help me."

He nodded, looked a little wary, waited.

"I believe you know Selma Jacobi," I said, deciding to give it to him straight.

He put the inhaler on the mantelpiece, frowned. "Nothing doing, my friend," he said shortly. "Sorry, but I'm not talking to a newspaper man about Mrs. Jacobi. If that's all you've come about then I'll say good night."

"I'm not talking to you as a newspaper man," I said. "My paper wouldn't be interested in Mrs. Jacobi. I'm talking to you as a friend of Netta Scott's."

He stared at his cigar thoughtfully, moved away from the fireplace

to the window.

"You knew Netta Scott?" he said. "So did I."

I didn't say anything, wondered if I should ask him if he owned the Bentley, decided I wouldn't.

"But what has Netta Scott to do with Mrs. Jacobi?" he went on, after a pause.

"I don't know," I said, stretching out my legs. "But I have a hunch there is a connection. I think Netta knew George Jacobi. I want to be sure. Maybe Selma could tell me."

"Why do you want to know that?" he asked, still looking out of the window.

"Maybe it'd explain why she committed suicide," I said. "You know about that?"

"Yes," he said, hunched his massive shoulders as if the subject wasn't to his taste. "Why should you be interested in Netta's suicide?"

"I don't believe in letting sleeping dogs lie," I said. "I've told you I'm inquisitive. Netta wasn't the type to commit suicide. I'm wondering if there's more behind it than I think."

He glanced over his shoulder, started to say something, stopped.

There was a long pause, then he said. "I haven't seen Mrs. Jacobi for two or three months, not since she married."

"Know where she lives?"

"She isn't there anymore," he returned. "The place is shut up."

"Where is it?"

He faced me. "What does it matter where it is? She isn't there, I tell you."

"Maybe she'll come back. Look, let me put it this way. The police are looking for you. At least, they're looking for a big guy who's first name is Peter, and who knew Netta. I'm not interested in helping the police. But they'd welcome the chance of talking to you, and they'd be a lot less polite than I am. I want Selma Jacobi's address. Either you give it to me or you'll give it to the police. I don't care which way it is, only make up your mind."

He chewed his cigar which had gone out, always a sign a guy's got something on his mind.

"What makes you think the police want to talk to me?" he asked, his voice cold.

I told him about Anne Scott, and what Mrs. Brambee had said.

"I've never heard of Anne Scott," he snapped. "I didn't even know Netta had a sister."

"Don't tell me; tell the judge. All I'm interested in is finding out Selma's address."

"I don't want the police nosing around here," he said, after a pause. "I'd take it as a favour if you kept your mouth shut. Selma lived at 3B

Hampton Street, off Russell Square. Now suppose you take yourself off. I have things to do before I go home, and I've given you quite enough of my time."

I got to my feet. "Have you a photo of Selma?"

He studied me for a moment, shook his head. "I don't collect photographs of married women," he said. "Good night."

"Well, thanks," I said, "you won't be bothered by the police through any information from me." I turned to the door, paused. "That's a fine car downstairs. Is it yours?"

He eyed me. "Yes. What of it?"

"Nothing. You're lucky to have a car like that."

"Good night," he repeated. "I'm beginning to understand how you got your face damaged. I'm also beginning to feel sorry those fellows didn't make a better job of it."

I grinned, said maybe I'd see him again, left him.

chapter seventeen

At some time, when Crystal had been prattling, she had mentioned that Jack Bradley seldom arrived at the club before ten o'clock for the evening's work.

I decided, as I walked through Shepherd Market, that if I called on him now, I might stand a good chance of finding him in.

Hay's Mews lies off Berkeley Square; and I arrived there in a few minutes.

Bradley's flat was over a garage. Lights were showing through the cream muslin curtains. I would have preferred to have climbed in through the window, but that was not possible. I did the next best thing: I punched the bell.

I waited a few minutes, then heard a step. The door opened. I didn't expect to see Frankie, but then he didn't expect to see me.

"Hello, tough guy," I said.

He took one look, alarm jumped into his eyes, and he opened his mouth to yell.

I was ready for that, and belted him under the chin. I caught him as he fell, lowered him carefully to the floor.

I stepped over him, closed the door, listened.

Ahead of me were stairs leading to the flat. A pedestal stood at the foot of the stairs on which was a bowl of orchids. I sneered at it.

The stairs were carpeted with thick green material that gave comfortingly under the feet, muffled the sound of steps. The walls were apricot, the banister rail dark green.

A voice called, "Frankie . . . who is it?"

A girl's voice, strangely familiar.

I stiffened, felt spooked. I knew the voice. I had heard it so many times before, but even at that it was hard to believe that it was Netta speaking.

I took a quick step forward, caught a glimpse of silk clad legs and the hem of a blue dress at the head of the stairs. Then I heard a startled gasp, the hem of the dress and the silk clad legs vanished.

There was a scurrying of feet.

I sprang up the stairs, didn't realize they were so steep, stumbled.

I cursed, regained my balance, went on up, hands touching each step as I went, arrived at a small lobby with three doors facing me.

One of the doors jerked open: Jack Bradley appeared. He wore a green dressing-gown, stiff white collar and black evening tie. His eyes were frozen stones, his mouth twisted with fury.

As I stepped towards him, I saw the .38 automatic in his hand,

paused.

"I'll make you pay for this," he snarled. "How dare you break in here!"

I listened, not looking at him. Somewhere a door closed. "Hello, Bradley," I said. "Who was your girlfriend?"

"I'll shoot if you try any tricks," he said. "Get your hands up. I'm calling the police."

"Oh, no, you're not," I said, "and you're not going to shoot. You haven't a gun permit, and the cops can make things awkward for a thug like you if you let guns off without a permit." I spoke rapidly, hoped my bluff would work, edged towards him.

I saw his expression change, a look of doubt in his eyes. That was enough for me. I slapped the gun out of his hand, kicked it down the stairs. He swung at me, but I shoved him aside, entered the room from which he had come.

The room was empty except for its rich furnishings. A smell of lilac hung in the air. So it had been Netta, I thought, again felt spooked.

There was a door at the far end of the room. I ran over, tried to open it, found it locked. I drew back, kicked at the lock, the door burst open. I looked out into the night from the head of an outside wooden stairway. As I stood there, I heard a car start up, drive away.

I turned, found Bradley sneaking up on me, a poker in his hand. I ducked the wild swing, caught his wrist, wrenched the poker out of his hand, I looked at him. His face was white and his eyes glared.

"I remember you once said you were tougher than Frankie," I said. "Here's your opportunity to show me."

I tossed the poker across the room. It knocked over a lamp standard which in its turn knocked over a small table on which stood bottles and glasses. The crash made a nice noise to my ears.

"You'll be sorry for this," Bradley snarled, backing away.

"So you're not so tough," I grinned at him. "You're the guy who tells other mugs to do your dirty work. Okay, Bradley, you're on the spot now. You'd better exert some of that fat and try to get out of it."

I grabbed hold of him by his dressing gown, shook him, threw him after the poker. He weighed about sixteen stone, but the bulk of it was fat.

I walked over to where he lay, sat on the arm of a chair, smiled at him. He didn't attempt to get up, glared up at me with eyes a snake'd be proud to own.

"Remember me, Bradley?" I said. "The guy who doesn't mind his own business? I thought maybe you mightn't recognize me after what your thugs did to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he snarled. "Get out of here before I call the police."

"You warned me you'd teach me a lesson, didn't you?" I went on, taking out a cigarette, lighting it. "Well, the lesson didn't stick. But my lesson will. I'm going to ruin that fat puss of yours, but before I start on you, you're going to answer some questions. Who was that girl you were talking to just now?"

"Nobody you know," he said, sitting up slowly. "If you don't get out, Harmas, I'll fix you. My God, I'll fix you!"

I kicked him in his fat chest, sending him over backwards.

"I told you that rats like you are a nickel a gross, didn't I?" I said, flicking ash it him. "You don't know what it is to be tough. Fix me?" I laughed. "You won't fix anyone by the time I'm through with you."

He lay holding on to his chest, his face purple with fury and pain, but he stayed right where he was.

"Come on, who's the dame? Talk or I'll sock you, and keep on socking you."

"It was Selma Jacobi," he snarled. "Now get out!"

I shook my head. "Oh, no, it wasn't," I said, kicking him gently. "It was Netta, wasn't it?"

His face went flabby. The purple drained away leaving his skin like tallow.

"You're mad!" he gasped, struggling up. "Netta's dead."

"You've given yourself away," I said, taking off my coat and rolling up my sleeves. “Get up, Bradley. You can try to do what your three hired thugs tried to do."

He lay as still as a corpse, looked at me with fear in his eyes.

"Leave me alone," he said. "You can't touch me, Harmas. I'm an old man. I have a weak heart."

I laughed. "You mean you're going to have a weak heart," I said, drew back my foot and booted him in his fat ribs. "Get up, you heel."

I had to kick him to his feet, then I hauled off and hit him in the eye, sent him reeling across the room. He clawed at a bookcase as he staggered back, trying to regain his balance. The bookcase swayed, crashed to the floor, spilling books. I picked up the heaviest, flung it at him. It caught him on the chest, and he went over, upsetting a chair.

Standing off, I pelted him with books until he took cover behind a settee. I went in after him, met his bull-like charge as he rushed at me, swept his feeble right lead out of the way, socked him in the other eye, steadied him as he reeled back, hit him in the mouth. My knuckles scraped along his teeth. I felt them give. He staggered away, spitting blood, his lips ballooning up, his eyes closing.

He made a wild dive for the telephone. I let him get his paw on it, then made a flying tackle, grabbed him around the knees, brought him down.

He caught me a glancing blow as we broke, but it had no more iron

in it than could be expected from a fat, middle-aged rat who fed on whisky for breakfast.

I tore the telephone wire out by its roots, hit him with the receiver until it shattered in my hand.

I stood off, looked around the room to see if there was anything standing. There wasn't, so I grabbed an oil painting of a fat dame in her birthday suit off the wall, broke it over Bradley's head as he came up for air.

I grabbed the lamp standard, hit him with that.

He lay flat on his back, gasping and wheezing, his face a lot less pretty than mine.

I waited hopefully for him to get up, but he didn't. As I was trying to make up my mind whether to call it a day or stand on his face, Frankie came in. He looked murderous. In his right hand he had a carving knife, and he handled it as if he meant to use it.

He didn't rush at me, but came slowly, the knife held in front of his skinny body, his lips off his teeth, his eyes glittering.

"Hello, Marmaduke," I said, "didn't your ma tell you it was dangerous to play with knives? You might cut yourself."

He crept towards me, snarling.

I decided it wouldn't be healthy to let him get too close. My hand groped behind me for a book, selected one, shot it at him. It hit him on the shoulder, but it didn't stop him. He kept coming, so I gave ground. I suddenly realized that if I didn't watch my step he'd murder me.

We moved around the room, each stepping over the ruins, careful not to trip, never taking our eyes off each other. I guessed he was manoeuvring me close to Bradley, and that Bradley would try to grab my legs. If that happened, Frankie would have plenty of opportunity to ventilate my hide.

I stopped giving ground, crouched.

This move startled Frankie for a moment: he stopped too. I moved a step forward. He made a feeble poke at me with the knife, undecided whether to go back or rush me. I rushed him while he was making up his mind.

I felt the knife slit my shirt-sleeve, scratch my biceps, but by then I had hold of his wrist. He clawed my face as I bent his arm back. It hurt, and I lost my temper for a moment. I snatched him up by the slack of his pants, threw him at Bradley as Bradley was slowly levering himself to his feet.

While they were sorting themselves out, I tossed the knife downstairs.

Both Bradley and Frankie were on their feet when I faced around.

Bradley seemed to have found a little courage now Frankie had

joined him.

"Kill the swine," he mumbled to Frankie, pushed him forward.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Frankie was pint-sized and without his knife he wouldn't have scared a midget. He had plenty of guts though, and rushed at me, fingers like claws. My fight wasn't with Frankie; it was with Bradley. I stood off, waited for him, clipped him as kindly as I could on his jaw. I caught him, lowered him to the floor, put a cushion under his head, shook mine at Bradley.

"You shouldn't let a kid like that fight your battles," I said, advancing on him. "Now, let's see if you can answer a few questions. That was Netta here, wasn't it?"

He grabbed a chair, threw it at me. I got out of the way, caught it by its legs, smashed it across his back. I knelt on him, slapped his fat face four or five times, took hold of his ears and banged his head on the carpet.

"Open up, you rat," I said, continuing to hammer his head on the carpet. I wished the floor was concrete, but I put a lot of steam into it and it seemed to hurt his ears, which was something. "That was Netta, wasn't it?"

"Stop it!" he bellowed. "Yes, it was, damn you!"

"Netta hack from the dead, eh?" I said, letting go of his ears, but cuffing him to keep him soft. "What did she want?"

"Money," he snarled.

"Did you give her any?"

"Three hundred pounds."

"What did she want it for?"

"To keep out of the way of the police."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

I took hold of his ears, bashed his head on the carpet again.

"Why?" I repeated.

"I don't know," he howled. "Honest to God I don't know." I sat down hard on his chest, flicked his nose with my forefinger. "Don't tell me you gave her all that dough just because she asked you for it. Why did you give it to her?"

"She sold me some rings," he moaned.

"Where are they?"

"Over there."

I dragged him to his feet, steadied him.

"Come on, don't he coy," I said. "Show me."

He staggered over to the smashed desk, pulled open a drawer.

"There," he said, collapsed on the floor.

I picked out four diamond rings, turned them over in my hand, looked at him.

"Jacobi's loot, eh?" I said.

He flinched. "I don't know what you're talking about. She said they were her rings. I don't know anything about Jacobi."

"Yes, you do, you rat," I said. "You haven't much longer to live outside a cell. You'd better talk fast. Where did she get these from?"

"I didn't ask her," he blubbered. "She offered me the stuff for three hundred. I could see they were worth more so I bought them."

"I'm going to hand these over to Corridan," I said, slipping the rings into my pocket. "You know what that'll mean."

"They're mine," he snarled, shaking his fist at me. "I'll have you up for stealing."

"Be your age," I said. "You know as well as I do that they're part of Jacobi's loot. Where can I get hold of Netta?"

"I don't know," he returned, holding a blood-stained handkerchief to his nose. "She didn't say where she was going. You came in at the wrong moment, blast you!"

I thought maybe that was the truth.

"Get up," I said.

He hesitated, but as I threatened him with my foot, he climbed to his feet, stood before me.

"Okay, Bradley," I said, "we're quits. The next time you think of teaching someone a lesson be more careful who you chose for a subject."

I looked him over, decided my face was now handsome compared with his, hauled off, hit him on the point of his fat chin, watched his flop. Then I unrolled my sleeves, put on my coat, walked to the door and scrammed.

chapter eighteen

I paid off the taxi at the corner of Hampden Street, walked down the narrow cul-de-sac. Three of the big buildings were blitzed, mere shells of charred brick and wood. The last building was a small printer's shop; the windows were boarded up, and the shop had a forlorn, neglected appearance. A door on the far side of the shop was numbered 311.

I stood back, looked up at the curtained windows. The place was in darkness.

I tried the door, for it, as I expected, locked. I stepped back again, surveyed the upper windows. There was a stack-pipe running close to one of them. I tested it, decided it was strong enough to take my weight, glanced back down the alley, saw no one.

I started to climb, wished I had on a less expensive suit, managed to hoist myself on to the sloping roof above the printer's shop. From there it was easy to reach the window. I looked into the darkness, listened. The traffic hummed in Russell Square, someone in the distance shouted "Taxi!" No sound carne from Selma Jacobi's flat.

I took out my pocket knife, levered back the window-catch, pushed up the window. One more glance behind me, then I stepped down into darkness.

I found myself in a bedroom. Immediately my skin began to tingle.

There was a distinct smell of lilac in the room. I drew the blind, then the curtains. I groped for my cigarette lighter, thumbed the flint. The feeble flame showed me the electric light switch. I crossed the room, turned on the light.

The room was small, but comfortably furnished. There was a divan bed in one corner, turned down, inviting. Across the foot of the bed was a blue silk nightdress; on the floor by the nightdress was a pair of blue mules.

To the right of the window there was a dressing-table, crammed with powder boxes, lip stick, lotions; everything a girl needs to keep herself well-groomed. A chest of drawers stood near the door, a wardrobe on the other side of the window.

I pulled open one of the drawers, glanced inside. There was a jumble of silk underwear and silk stockings. I pulled the stockings out.

Sonic of them had been worn, some of them were still in their transparent envelopes. I grunted, put them back, turned off the light. I opened the door, listened. The silence and stillness made me feel spooked. I heard nothing, except my own breathing and the steady beat of my pulse.

I stepped into a narrow, short passage, saw the head of the stairs at one end and a door at the other. I crept to the door, put my ear against the panel, listened. There was no sound. I turned the handle, pushed open the door, looked into the inky darkness. Again I listened, uneasy, a little scared. My hand groped along the wall, found the electric light switch, hesitated, then snapped it down.

For a second or so I stood looking around the large well-furnished room, then the hair on the back of my neck bristled; I caught my breath sharply.

Lying on the floor, his small hands flat on the blue-and-fawn carpet, his legs screwed up, his eyes sightless, his mouth below the straggling moustache twisted in horror, was Henry Littlejohns.

I stepped forward, saw the broken skin on the side of his head, and the blood that had run down his neck and had spread like an obscene halo around his head. Near him was a heavy steel poker, its knobbed handle stained red.

I avoided the blood, bent, touched his hand. It was warm, limp. I raised his arm, let it fall. It thudded back on the carpet. He hadn't been dead long.

I was so shocked, so surprised that for several minutes I could only stare clown at him, feeling nothing, my mind a blank.

Then I stiffened, my heart gave a lurch and began to pound so violently I could scarcely breathe.

At the far end of the room was a door which was now slowly opening. It inched open, stopped, inched open again.

"Who is it?" I said in a voice I didn't recognize as my own. The door jerked open. I took an involuntary step back. Netta stood there.

We looked at each other over Littlejohn's dead body.

Then she said, "Oh, Steve, Steve, Steve, thank God you've found me at last."

I still stood there like a dummy, and she ran over to me, caught hold of my arm.

"It's Netta, Steve," she sobbed, flung herself in my arms.

I couldn't keep my eyes off Littlejohn, but I held her, said nothing.

"Take me away, Steve," she sobbed. "Please take me away."

I pulled myself together, slipped my arm around her, led her into the bedroom. We sat on the divan bed, and I let her cry. There was nothing I could do to stop her.

After a while I said, "Netta, this won't get us anywhere. Come on, snap out of it. I'll help you if I can."

She pulled away from me, her eyes glassy with terror, ran her fingers through her thick red hair.

"You don't understand," she said, her husky voice off-key, cracked. "I killed him! Do you hear, Steve? I killed him!"

I went cold, tried to say something, but succeeded in making only a croaking noise.

She suddenly jumped to her feet, ran to the door. Before she reached it, I caught hold of her. She struggled to get away, but I held her. We stared at each other: both of us scared now.

"You killed him?" I said. "For God's sake, Netta!"

She collapsed against me. I smelt lilac in her hair.

"They'll get me now, Steve," she said, moaned against my chest. "I've kept out of their way until now, but they'll get me for this."

I felt cold sweat on my face. I wanted to run, get the hell out of here, leave her. This was murder; this wasn't something I could fool around with and pass over to Corridan if I made a mess of it. This was murder. I gripped her arms, tried to think. Maybe the moments of happiness this kid had given me two years ago helped to bridge the horror I felt. Maybe that thought stopped me from running out on her.

"Take it easy," I said, holding her close. "What we need is a drink. Have you any Scotch in the place?"

She shuddered, clung more tightly. "It's in there," she said. I knew where she meant. I pushed her gently away, sat her on the bed.

"Hang on," I said. "I'll be right back."

"No!" she exclaimed, her voice shooting up. "You mustn't leave me. Steve! You mustn't leave me." She caught hold of my wrist, her nails bit into my flesh.

"It's all right," I said, trying to stop my teeth chattering. "I'll be right back. Take it easy, can't you?"

"No! You won't come back. You're going to run out on me. You're going to leave me in this mess. You're not to, Steve ! You're not to!"

She began to cry again, then suddenly she put her hands to her face and screamed wildly.

The sound went through my head like white-hot wires. I was stiff with fright. I snatched her hands away, smacked her face hard, knocking her backwards across the bed.

I stood over her. "Shut up, you little fool," I said, trembling, sweating. "Do you want someone to come here with that in there?"

She stopped screaming, looked up at me, her eyes empty; one side of her face red where I had hit her.

"I'm coming back," I went on. "Stay still and don't make a sound."

I crossed the passage, went into the sitting room. He was still there, small, defenceless, pathetic. I looked down at him, feeling bad.

I looked at his worn suit, at his shabby boots, at his thick ribbed socks that hung in wrinkles. I looked at the terror in his eyes, the twisted mouth. I reached down, patted his arm.

Clutched tightly between his finger and thumb was a scrap of paper. I bent closer, gently pulled it from between his fingers. It was a glossy

scrap of paper-a piece torn from a photograph. I stared at it, puzzled.

A bluebottle walked across one of his fixed eyes, then buzzed around his blood. I shivered, put the scrap of paper in my vest pocket, went to the cupboard by the fireplace and found a full bottle of Scotch. I carried it and two glasses into the bedroom, shut the door.

Netta was lying face down across the bed. Her skirt had nicked up and I could see an inch or so of bare thigh. Bare thighs mean nothing to a guy in a moment like this. Her thigh meant less than nothing to me.

I poured a. big shot of whisky into both glasses, noted my hand was no steadier than an aspen leaf. I drank the liquor; it went down like water, hit my stomach; a moment later, I felt alive again.

I leaned over Netta, pulled her up.

"Come on," I said, "get this down into you."

I had to feed it to her. Her hand made mine look like a rock. She got it down, gagged, then stopped crying. I gave her my handkerchief, gave myself another shot of Liquor, put the bottle down.

"Have a cigarette," I said, pushing one between her trembling lips, took one myself, lit both.

I sat on the bed, at her side.

You have to talk, and talk fast," I said. "I'll help you if I can. I don't know what game you've been playing or why, but if you'll give it me straight, I'll do what I can for you. Now, shoot."

She dragged down smoke, pressed back the mass of red hair that was hiding her face. She looked pretty bad. Dark shadows circled her eyes; her nose seemed pinched. She had lost a lot of weight since last I saw her. Worse still, she had a blank, crazy expression in her eyes that scared me. I didn't like that expression. The rest of her looks were bad, but nothing rest and sunshine couldn't put right. But the blank expression was something else: I had seen it in the faces of the French girls after days of air strafing or after we'd rescued them from some Hun. It was that kind of expression.

"I killed him," she said quietly. The whisky had pulled her together as I meant it to do. "I heard a sound, crept in there. It was dark. I saw something move and hit out." She shuddered, hid her face. "Then I put on the light. I—I thought it was Peter French."

I was listening, sitting forward, cigarette between my lips, listening with both ears.

"It won't do, Netta," I said, putting my hand on her knee. “We'll start from the beginning. Never mind about the little guy. Forget him for the moment. Start right from the beginning."

She clenched her fists, not looking up.

"I can't go through all that. I can't."

"You've got to. Come on, Netta. If I'm to help you, I must know how

bad it is. Right from the beginning."

"No!" She sprang to her feet, upsetting the glass she had balanced on the divan. "Let me go! I can't stay here with him in there. You've got to get me away."

I grabbed her wrists, shook her, dragged her down beside me on the bed.

"Shut up!" I said fiercely. "You're not moving out of here until you've talked. Do you know what you're asking me to do? You're asking me to stick my neck in a noose."

She gasped, tried to break away, but I held her close.

"I won't do that for anyone, Netta. Not unless I'm sure whoever it is is worth it and deserves it. That goes for you, so if you want my help, sit still and talk, and talk fast."

She went limp against me, her breath coming in shuddering gasps.

"Listen, Netta," I went on, "that little guy was working for me. Maybe you didn't mean to kill him, but you killed him just the same, and nothing either of us can do can bring him back to life again. I liked him, and I feel bad about it. He had a lot of guts. If it'd been anyone else but you I'd be calling the police right now. But I haven't forgotten what you did for me in the past. I owe you plenty, but I'm not helping you until you talk. Now relax and tell me. Tell me everything from the beginning."

She beat her hands together. "But what do you want to know?" she gasped. "Can't you see, Steve, the longer we stay here the worse it'll be? They'll find us . . . find me."

"Who was the girl in your flat . . . the one who died?" I asked, deciding questions were more direct, would get me quicker results.

She shuddered. "Anne . . . my sister."

"Who was the guy with her?"

She looked up. "How did you know . . . ?"

I took hold of her chin between finger and thumb, looked into her eves. She didn't flinch.

"Quit stalling," I said. "Answer my questions. Who was the guy with her."

"Peter French."

"What was he to her?"

"Her lover."

"And to you?"

"Nothing."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"He killed her, didn't he?"

Her face went paler, her teeth chewed her lower lip, but she said it, "Yes."

I drew back, wiped my face with the back of my hand.

"Why?"

"She found out he killed George Jacobi."

"How?"

She shook her head. "She never had the chance to tell me."

"French and you were seen around together. How did that come about?"

"He was trying to find Anne. He thought if he kept near me I'd lead him to her."

"Where was she?"

"Hiding. She found out he and Jacobi were behind the Allenby robbery, and then later that French had killed Jacobi. She was scared, so she hid."

"And French found her?"

She nodded. "He found her in a night club. She was drunk. Anne was always getting drunk. French knew that, and he was afraid she'd talk. He brought her to me."

“Why?”

She twisted her hands in her lap. "He wanted to talk to her, to find out how much she knew. The night club was close and there wasn't much time."

"When did they arrive?"

"About one. I was asleep. I let them in. I could see Anne was terrified, although she was very drunk. She managed to whisper to me that French was going to kill her, and I wasn't to let her out of my sight." Netta hid her face. "I can hear her voice now."

I poured out another shot of whisky, fed it down her throat.

"Keep going," I said. "Then what happened?"

"I didn't know what to do. I wanted to get dressed, but Anne wouldn't let me leave her alone with French, and he wouldn't let her go into my room. I stalled for time, and brought out drinks. He spiked our drinks. I went out like a light. I hadn't a chance to warn Anne. It worked so quickly. I heard Anne scream, and then I knew nothing more."

"Then he murdered her?" I asked quietly.

She nodded dully, struggled with her tears. "I'm so frightened. He'll do the same to me!"

"Take it easy. What happened then? Come on, Netta, I want the whole story. What happened then?"

"I have a confused recollection of getting into my clothes, being half carried down the stairs. Ju Cole was on the landing. French spoke to him, but I was too doped to hear what was said. French pushed me out of the house. The night air pulled me together, and I started to struggle." She closed her eyes. "He hit me, and the next thing I

remember was being in his car. I struggled up, and he hit me again. I came to later in a room. There was a woman watching me: Mrs. Brambee. French came in after a while. He warned me he'd kill me if I didn't stay there and do what I was told."

"Ever hear of Mrs. Brambee before?"

She nodded. "Anne had a cottage at Lakeham. French bought it for her. He used to go down weekends or whenever he had the time. Mrs. Brambee looked after the place."

"Why did they keep you a prisoner?" I asked, giving her another cigarette.

"French wanted the police to think I and not Anne died in my flat."

"But why, for God's sake?"

"He knew they couldn't trace him through me, but he and Anne had been around a lot together, and he was scared they'd connect him with her death. There was something going on at the cottage he didn't want the police to find out, and he thought the police would find the cottage if they began to make inquiries about Anne."

"What was going on at the cottage?"

"I don't know."

"How did you find this out?"

"Mrs. Brambee told me. She was scared of French and liked Anne."

"When I turned up, he realized his scheme wouldn't work, is that it?"

"Yes. But Cole telephoned him, told him you had been up and that you would most likely want to see the—the body. French got into a panic, and with a couple of his men took Anne from the mortuary. They rushed her down to the cottage, fixed it to look as if Anne had committed suicide there instead of at my flat."

"Well, I'll be double damned," I exclaimed. "You mean to tell me the girl who died in your flat and the girl found in the cottage were one and the same?"

"It was Anne."

"But one of them was a redhead and the other a blonde."

Netta shuddered. "French stopped at nothing. My hair's not really red. I had a bottle of henna dye and he dyed Anne's hair while she was drugged. Then when he brought her to the cottage he used a peroxide wash, brought her hair back to its natural colour."

I grimaced. This guy was certainly a cold-blooded rat if ever there was one.

"Well, go on, what happened then?"

"I was in the way. The police were looking for my body. French planned to kill me and plant my body where the police could find it. Ju Cole wouldn't let him. Ju and I had always got on together. As long as Ju was with me, I was safe. He told me French had planted one of

Allenby's rings in my flat and the police were looking for me. I got scared. I thought the police were after me, and I knew French was waiting his chance to kill me. I made Ju help me escape. I got away, came to London. There was only one place I could think of to hide in . . . here. Selma and I were friends. I used to come here in the old days, before she married Jacobi. I knew Selma had gone to America with Peter, after George had been killed. Peter smuggled her over."

"Peter? Peter who?"

She frowned, passed her hand across her eyes. "I was forgetting you didn't know him. Peter Utterly. He was an American, over here in the Army. He was nice, and when Selina was in trouble, he offered to take her back to his home and to look after her."

"Was he the guy who gave you the Luger pistol?"

"Luger pistol?" she repeated blankly, then nodded. "I'd forgotten that. I promised to keep it for him, but when he went we both forgot I had it. How do you know about it?"

"Corridan has it," I said. "We both thought it was the gun that had killed Jacobi."

She went white. "But they know now it isn't?"

"Sure, they know," I said, patting her knee. "I'm nearly through. Why did you go to Bradley?"

"I had to. I hadn't any money. Bradley has always been decent to me after our first fight. I had no one to turn to. I was scared to come to you. Ju told me you were always going around with the police. I wanted to come to you, but Ju said it was too dangerous. So I went to Bradley. I told him the whole story. He was decent and gave me two hundred pounds. Then you arrived; I got in a panic and ran."

I stroked my nose. "Go on," I said.

"I came back here," she went on, suddenly gripping my wrist. "I let myself in, came upstairs. I heard someone moving about in the sitting room. I thought it was French. I swear I thought it was French."

She broke off to stare into my face. "Steve! You must believe me."

"Go on," I said.

"I thought he had come to kill me. I was crazy with fear. I didn't know what I was doing. I grabbed the poker, waited in the dark. Something moved, came at me. I—I lost my head . . . hit out." She hid her face in her hands. "Steve, you must help me. I'm so frightened. Say you believe me. Say you'll help me. Please. . . ."

I got to my feet, walked the length of the room. "How the hell can I help you?" I asked. "They'll find him here sooner or later. They'll find out he was working for me. They'll find out you've been hiding here. The only thing we can do is to tell this story to Corridan. It's the only way, Netta. He'll understand. He'll help you."

She stood up. "No! French will kill me before the police can do

anything. If he doesn't, they won't believe me. I know they won't. No one would believe me except you." She put her arms around my neck, held me close. "Steve, I'm asking you to help me. I know you can do it. You can get me out of the country the way Peter Utterly got Selma out. We can go in a day or so. Before they find him." She looked shudderingly over her shoulder. "Peter took Selma back in one of his friends' aircraft. Can't you do the same for me? Can't you get me out of this after what we've been together?"

"Let me think," I said, sat on the bed, lit another cigarette. I stayed like that for several minutes. Then I said, "Okay, Netta, I'll do it. I'll get you out of the country and then I guess we're quits. I owe you something, but I didn't think the price would be as steep as this. But I'll do it."

She fell on her knees beside me.

"But how will you do it?" she asked, gripping my hand.

"Harry Bik will get us out. Do you remember him? I brought him to the Club the night I first saw you. He's shipping kites back to America every week. He'll do it. He's that kind of a guy. We'll smuggle you on to the airfield, and get you across to the other side somehow. We'll do it, Netta, don't worry. When I say I'll do it, I'll damn well do it."

She began to cry again, her face against my knee.

I played with her hair, stared at the framed picture of a cutie in yellow pants above the bed. The look in her eyes called me a sucker.

Maybe I was.

chapter nineteen

While Netta was packing a bag, I washed the glasses, wiped them free of finger-prints, put them and the bottle of Scotch back into the cupboard. With my handkerchief I picked up the blood-encrusted poker, washed it, put it back beside Littlejohns.

I entered the bedroom again to find Netta cramming her things into a big Revelation suitcase.

"There mustn't be one thing left here that could lead them to you," I said.

"I've packed everything," she returned, closing the lid. "Sure?"

She looked around the room, nodded. "Yes."

"Okay," I said. "Now we have to think where you can go until I've fixed the plane. It may take a couple of days."

"I know where to go," she said. "I've been thinking while you were out of the room. I know now."

I looked at her. "Where?"

"Madge Kennitt's flat."

I gaped at her. "What's that?"

"Made Kennitt's flat. No one would think of looking for me there."

"For God's sake!" I exclaimed. "Didn't you know? She was murdered. You can't go there."

"Yes, I can. The place is empty, and the police have finished with it. Mrs. Crockett wouldn't try to let it until the murder's forgotten. It'll be perfectly safe for the next three or four days. But that's not the only reason why I'm going there. Madge laid in a stock of tinned food at the beginning of the war. I know where she hid it. I'm sure it's still there. I've got to eat, and if I go there I don't have to go out at all until you call for me."

"You sure the food's still there?"

"I think so. At least, I can go and see."

I didn't much like the idea, but agreed the food question was difficult.

"But how will you get in?"

"My key fits her lock. It fits Ju's as well. They have all more or less the same locks on all the flat doors."

"Well, all right," I said. "But you'll have to be damned careful."

I suddenly realized that if Cole's key opened Madge's door, then he might have killed her; might have wiped out the name, Jacobi, that had been written in the dust. I filed that piece of information away for future reference.

"I'll be careful," she said.

"Okay, then that's settled. When I've fixed things, I'll come for you in a car. Be ready any night to move quick."

She came to me, put her hands on my shoulders. Terror still lurked at the back of her eyes, but she was quieter, had a grip on her nerves.

"I can't thank you enough, Steve," she said. "Maybe I have been a fool since last we met, but I'm not bad — not really bad, and I never forgot you."

I patted her shoulder, turned away.

"We're both now in a hell of a mess," I said soberly. "If we aren't smart, and if we play our cards badly, we're going to be in a real tough spot. Make no mistake about it. I wouldn't do this for anyone but you, Netta."

She slipped her hand into mine. "I know, and I shouldn't let you do it, Steve," she said. "I lost my head just now, but I've got over that now. If you want to back out, I shan't blame you, and I'll manage somehow. All my life I've had to manage. I can still go on fighting alone."

"Forget it," I said shortly. "We're in this together. But there's one thing that bothers me . . ."

She looked searchingly at me. "What, Steve?"

"Peter French. If we quit, he's going to get away with it."

She gripped my ann. "Then let him get away with it. We can't do anything to him without getting ourselves in a mess. Don't start anything like that, Steve. It'll only come back to us."

I nodded. "I guess you're right, only I hate to think a rat like French . . ."

Her grip on my arm tightened, her eyes opened wide. "Listen," she whispered.

"What is . . . ?" I began, but her hand flew to my mouth.

"Someone's in the flat," she breathed. "Listen!"

That gave me a hell of a jar. I froze, looked towards the door.

She was right. Very faintly from downstairs I heard footsteps.

With my heart leaping like a salmon caught on a line, I stepped to the electric light switch, snapped out the light.

"Wait here," I whispered. "Don't make a sound. Watch your opportunity. Get out if you can, but don't leave that bag here. Do you think you can carry it?"

I could feel her body trembling against mine.

"I'll try," she said. "Oh, God! I'm scared. Who is it, do you think?"

"I'm going to find out," I whispered back. "But don't wait for me."

I crept over to the back window, looked down on a sloping roof, into a yard.

"That's your way out," I said, my lips close to her ear. "Give me a couple of minutes, then get on to the roof, slide down, and into the

yard. Go to Madge's place. I'll get in touch with you in a day or so."

Her fingers touched my hand.

"Darling Steve," she said.

"Bolt the door after me, kid," I returned, pressed her hand, peered into the passage. I listened, heard nothing, stepped from the room, shut the door.

I heard Netta slide the bolt. I crossed the passage, entered the sitting room, groped my way across to the lamp. I found it after a moment's fumbling, removed the bulb, put it carefully on the floor. I remembered finger-prints, took out my handkerchief, picked up the bulb, wiped it, laid it down again.

I moved back to the door, stood listening, sweat on my face, my heart pounding.

For some seconds I heard nothing, then a faint creak came to my straining ears, followed by another creak. Someone was coming up the stairs.

I stood against the wall on the far side of the door, waited. I heard a door handle turn and knew the intruder had reached the top of the stairs, was trying Netta's door. I hoped she had the nerve not to scream. I felt like screaming myself.

More silence. You could cut the stillness in the flat with a knife.

Then suddenly I felt rather than saw the door behind which I was standing, opening. My mouth went dry, the hair on the back of my neck moved. Inch by inch the door opened, then stopped. I saw a white shape, a hand, groping down the wall for the electric light switch, find it.

The click the switch made as it was snapped down was like a pistol shot in the silent room. The room stayed dark, and I thanked my stars I had thought of removing the bulb. I flexed my muscles, clenched my fists, waited.

There was a long pause, the door didn't open farther; there was no sound except my own thumping heart. I waited, my nerves stretched, my breathing controlled. To my straining ears came a new sound; someone breathing. I wondered if whoever it was could hear my breathing, and if that was what made him hesitate.

The door began to open again. I crouched against the wall, ready to spring.

A dark shadow appeared around the door: the head and shoulders of a man. I could just make out his blurred outline against the blind. I knew I was invisible in the darkness, waited to see what he'd do.

He peered around the room, took another step forward. Then I heard a new sound, a sharp creak from Netta's window, as she pushed it up.

Instantly the man whipped around, dashed across the passage, tried

Netta's door again.

"I hear you," he shouted. "Open up! Come on! Open up."

It was Corridan!

For a moment I was in such a panic I couldn't move. Then I heard Corridan throw his weight against Netta's door, heard the door groan.

I didn't dare hesitate a moment longer. I kicked over a chair which fell against a small table. The racket the two things made as they went over sounded to me like a mine going up.

I heard a startled exclamation from Corridan. A moment later he entered the sitting room. I saw him grope in his hip pocket, and I crept towards him, crouching, prayed he wouldn't hear me.

A second after the bright beam from an electric torch he had taken from his pocket fell on Littlejohns.

I heard Corridan catch his breath. In that hard light Littlejohns was enough to shake the toughest nerve. For a moment Corridan seemed paralysed with surprise and shock. In that moment, I jumped him.

We went down together like a couple of buffalo, smashed the small table to matchwood. I slammed my fist in his face, caught the torch from his hand, flung it with all my strength at the wall. It went out.

Corridan twisted under me, hit me a sledge-hammer blow in the chest. I grabbed him, tried to hold him down, but he was much too strong for me.

For two or three seconds we fought like animals. Both of us were half crazy with fear, and we punched, bit and kneed each other in a frenzy of waving arms and legs. Corridan was tough all right. He knew every dirty trick there was to know in fighting. If I hadn't had a Ranger training as a war correspondent, I wouldn't have lasted two minutes with him.

I got a head lock on him after a moment, tried to throttle him by squeezing his throat with my forearm, but he hit me so heavily about the body, I couldn't hold him. I broke from him, jumped to my feet.

He had me around the legs before I could step clear, and I came down on my back. My breath whistled out of my body, and for one second I was helpless. That was a lot of time to a guy like Corridan. He was kneeling on my arms by the time I had my wind back, and it was like being sat upon by St. Paul's Cathedral.

"Let's look at you, you bastard," he panted.

I heard a rattle of matches. If he saw who I was I was done for. I hadn't a chance being caught with Littlejohns.

I made a terrific effort, brought my legs up, managed to boot him at the back of his head. He fell forward on top of me and I got my arms free. But he came back, grabbed at my head, tried to smash it down on the floor. By keeping my neck stiff I defeated this move, sank a punch into his belly that went in a foot.

He gasped, gagged, fell off me. My hand closed around one of the table legs. I swung blindly at him, felt a jar run up my arm as the table leg connected, heard him flop.

I lay gasping for breath, feeling as if I'd been fed through a mangle. I knew I couldn't waste a moment ; I struggled up kicked his legs off mine, reached out and touched him. He didn't move. For one horrible moment I thought I'd killed him, but then I heard him breathing. Any second now he'd come to the surface. I had to get out while the going was good.

I got to my feet, staggered out of the room, peered into Netta's room. The window was open. She had gone. I grabbed hold of the banister rail, nearly fell down the stairs. Reaching the front door, I waited a moment while I pulled myself together, opened it, stepped into the dark cul-de-sac. The night air helped me to come to the surface, but I was still groggy as I half ran, half walked to the main road.

I kept on, found myself in Russell Square, then Kingsway. I reached the Strand, and by that time I was walking steadily. I had to get myself a cast-iron alibi; an alibi so good that Corridan couldn't even suspect it. I wondered if he had recognized me. I hadn't made a sound while we fought, and it had been almost pitch dark. With luck, I'd get away with it.

I passed a telephone booth, hesitated, entered, called Crystal. I didn't expect she'd be back from the Club as yet. It was only eleven-fifteen, but to my relief she answered.

"It's Steve," I said. "No, don't talk. This is serious. How long have you been back from the Club?"

"An hour. I had a headache and thought I'd come home. Why?"

"Anyone see you come home?"

"No. What's the matter, precious?"

"Plenty," I said grimly. "I'm on my way over. I've been with you for the past hour, and I'm spending the night with you. Is that all right?"

"Is it all right?" Her voice shot up a note. "You bet it's all right! You come right over."

"I'm coming," I said, hung up.

As I turned to leave the booth I had an idea. I put in two more pennies, called Fred Ullman of the Morning Mail.

When he came on the line, I said, "Pin your ears back, Fred. I've got the biggest story that's hit the headlines for years! It's exclusive and all yours. Will you earn it?"

"I'll earn it, if it's as good as that, but you'll have to convince me. What do you want me to do?" he returned.

I leaned up against the wall of the booth and told him.

chapter twenty

I returned to the Savoy the following morning soon after eleven o'clock. As I asked the clerk at the Inquiry Desk for my key, I felt a hand touch my arm. I took the key, glanced around.

Corridan, looking very massive and dour, was standing at my side.

"Well, well," I said, with what I hoped was a friendly smile. "My old pal again, always turning up like Boris Karloff. What brings you here? Lost your way?"

He shook his head. His eyes were frosty, his mouth set in a hard line. "I want to talk to you, Harmas," he said. "Shall we go to your room?"

"Let's go to the bar," I returned. "It's just on opening time. You look as if I need a drink."

"I think we'll go to your room."

"Well, if you insist. Come along then. You don't look your usual sunny self. What's troubling you? Don't tell me you've fallen in love, or is it indigestion?"

"This isn't a joking matter," he returned, walking with me to the elevator.

"That's the usual trouble with you," I said. "You haven't a sense of humour."

We entered the elevator, rode up to the second floor.

"If you did have a sense of humour you'd be a truly great man. Take me for example," I said, as we walked along the corridor to my room. "Where should I be if I couldn't crack a gag now and then? I'll tell you. I'd be in the depths of despair. And why? Because I'd think you were going to arrest me."

He shot me a sharp look. "What makes you say that?" he demanded, pausing outside my door while I unlocked it.

"You have the appearance of a well-meaning flatfoot about to make an arrest," I returned. "Only you're going to be disappointed."

"We'll see about that," he said, entered the room, took off his hat, faced me.

I noted the livid bruise on his temple where I had hit him with the table leg, hoped he hadn't any proof to connect me with the assault.

"Hello, hello," I said, eyeing him. "My turn to gloat now. How did you get that bruise? Trying to beat your head against a brick wall, I suppose."

"We'll cut out this fooling if you please," Corridan said. I had never seen him so serious before. "Where were you last night?"

Here it comes, I thought, and wandered over to where I kept a

bottle of whisky.

"That is no business of yours," I returned gently. "Have a drink?" I unscrewed the cap, poured whisky into a glass.

He shook his head. "It is my business, and you'd better realize that this is a very serious matter for you."

I sipped the whisky, eyed him.

"Now I wonder what's got into your head, Corridan?" I asked. "In other words, what the hell's biting you?"

"Ever heard of Henry Littlejohns?"

I nodded. "Sure. He's a private dick. Why?"

"You employed him, didn't you?"

"Well, yes. I still employ him for that matter. What's it to do with you?"

"Quite a lot. He was murdered last night."

I gave what I hoped was a surprised start, put down my whisky, said, "Murdered? Good God! Littlejohns murdered?"

It wasn't particularly convincing, and I could see it didn't convince Corridan.

"I warned you, Harmas, the next time you were connected with a murder it was going to be unpleasant for you. Well, you know what to expect, don't you?"

"Now don't let's forsake our sense of humour," I said. "You can't scare me, Corridan, or can you? I've nothing to do with Littlejohns' death, and you know it."

"I think you have," he said, watching me closely.

I stared at him, and experienced a little difficulty in meeting his penetrating eyes.

"Now wait a minute. You aren't serious about this?" I asked, managed a laugh. It sounded pretty ghastly even to me, so I cut it out.

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"I'm not," Corridan replied. "I'd advise you to be serious about this, too."

"All right, let's be serious. Suppose you explain what you're talking about?"

"When did you last see Netta Scott?" he shot at me.

I wasn't quite prepared for that one, and hesitated. He was quick to spot that, and I saw his face tighten.

"I guess it must have been two years ago," I said slowly.

"You didn't see her last night?"

"Last night?" I repeated. "You crazy or something? She's been dead a week. Or do you mean you've found her body?" He wandered to the armchair, sat down.

"Look, Harmas, this won't do," he said quietly. "We both know that Netta's alive."

I looked down at my hands, saw they weren't too steady, shoved them in my trouser pockets.

"I haven't seen Netta for two years," I said steadily.

He studied me, nodded. "Where were you last night?"

"That's something I can't very well tell you," I said, looking away. "It involves a question of honour."

Corridan controlled his temper with an effort. "Look, Harmas, if you don't tell me where you were last night, I'll have no alternative but to take you to the station. I don't want to be official about this, but if you're going to act the fool and lie to me I damn well will be!"

"You're not seriously suggesting that I killed Littlejohns, are you?" I asked, staring at him.

"If you want me to caution you, and make this official, I will," Corridan said. "At the moment I'm treating you like a friend. If you can convince me that you couldn't possibly have been on the scene of the crime, then-I shall be satisfied. If you can't convince me, I'm going to arrest you."

I sat down, pretended to be shocked.

"Well, if it's like that," I said, "I suppose I'll have to tell you. I was with Crystal Godwin."

His face hardened. "Oh, were you? What time did you meet her and what time did you leave her?"

I considered the question, said, "I picked her up outside the Blue Club at - now, what time was it? - at ten-ten. I remember looking at my watch when she turned up. We'd arranged to meet at ten, and I was impatient because she was late. Then we went on to her flat."

"What time did you leave?" Corridan snapped.

"Now this puts me in a difficult position. Strictly between you and me, I left this morning."

He studied me for an uncomfortable moment. "A very obvious alibi, Harmas. That girl would tell any lie to save your skin."

"I believe she would," I returned, hoisting a stiff smile to my face. "After all, I did give her six pairs of silk stockings. I'd expect her to repay me somehow. All the same, Corridan, it's an alibi. If you think your old pal would tell a lie like that, then I'm sorry. I'm more than that — I'm hurt."

"We'll see about that," Corridan returned grimly. "I might be able to shake that young woman. It's not the first time I've persuaded someone against perjury. Perhaps I'll succeed again."

I hoped that Crystal had more backbone than I thought she had, mentally crossed my fingers.

"Well, if you don't believe me," I said, shrugging, "you'd better talk to Miss Godwin. She'll convince you even if I don't. Look me up after you've seen her and apologize nicely. It'll cost you a bottle of

champagne."

"I don't think it will," Corridan said, leaning back in the chair. "You once said Netta Scott's favourite perfume was lilac," he went on, changing the subject abruptly. "Do you remember?"

"Did I?" I said. "I say a lot of things and don't mean half of them. Why bring Netta's perfume into this sordid topic?"

"There was a strong smell of lilac in the flat where Littlejohns was murdered," Corridan returned. "You know, Harmas, you'd be advised to tell the truth. We know for certain that Netta Scott's alive. We're looking for her now, and it won't be long before we catch her. We know she's connected with the Allenby robbery, that she was present when her sister was murdered, and that makes her an accessory. We know too that she was in the flat when Littlejohns was murdered."

I raised my eyebrows, didn't say anything, but I was badly shaken.

I'd thought Corridan had been running around in circles, but it now seemed that he knew as much as I did about this case.

"What do you know about a yellow and black Bentley?" he suddenly shot at me.

He'd got that from Merryweather, I decided, lifted my shoulders.

"Only that Littlejohns reported that it was seen outside the cottage at Lakeham. Why?"

"We're looking for the car," Corridan said. "The owner we think is connected with Anne's murder. Do you know where the car is?"

I hesitated, then decided it'd be too dangerous to tell him about Peter French. I could have only got the information from Netta, and it was the kind of trap he'd've liked to see me walk into.

"No idea," I said.

He grunted. "I think, Harmas, you are behaving like a blind fool," he said. "You're trying to protect Netta Scott because you and she were lovers in the past. I'm sure you were trying to protect her last night when Littlejohns surprised you both. And what is more, you hit him, and killed him. How do you like that?"

I was beginning to sweat. "I love it," I said, with a fixed grin.

"What an imagination you've cultivated."

He waited hopefully to see if I was going to say anything more, then, seeing I wasn't, went on, "This is a serious matter for you, Harmas. You could also be tied to the Kennitt murder."

"Could I?" I said, startled.

"Yes, the motive's there all right. You could have killed Madge Kennitt because she knew Netta Scott was alive. You were the last one to see her, and if I can find Julius Cole he might be able to tell me what happened while you and Madge were together. I only want one good witness, Harmas, and your goose is cooked."

I finished my whisky. I felt I needed it. This had turned out far

worse than I expected.

"You'd better have your head examined, Corridan," I said, a little feverishly. "You've been working too hard or something."

"Don't worry about my head," Corridan returned coldly. "You'd better start worrying about your neck. Ever since you arrived in this country you've been mixed up in murder. I warned you to mind your own business, now perhaps you wish you had."

"And to think we called each other by our Christian names, and you ate the food I paid for," I said, shaking my head. "Well, my mother always told me not to trust a policeman. Go ahead, Corridan, and try to hang something on me. I don't think you'll succeed, but you can try. The trouble with the British law is that the onus is on you to prove me guilty, not for me to prove myself innocent. Until you have a few reliable witnesses I don't think you should get too inflated with your cock-eyed theories."

He got to his feet, turned to the door. "When I lay my hands on Netta Scott and Julius Cole I shall have all the witnesses I want," he said quietly. "Those two, I think, will talk fast enough for me to get my hands on you. Don't forget I haven't yet failed to solve a murder case."

"The exception always proves the rule," I said hopefully. "Maybe you're heading for your first great failure."

He took from his pocket a small cardboard box. I recognized it immediately. It was the box I'd borrowed from Crystal the previous night, and in which I had sent Corridan the four diamond rings I'd taken from Bradley. The rings had worried me. If they weren't connected with the Jacobi case, I was on a spot. I had decided to send them to Corridan anonymously in the hope he would identify them.

"Seen this before?" he asked abruptly.

I shook my head. "Don't tell me one of your fans has sent you a present?"

He opened the box, shook the four rings into the palm of his hand.

"Or these?"

Again I shook my head. "No, what are they? Part of Jacobi's loot?"

He looked sharply at me. "What makes you think that?"

"I still have my Ouija board," I said, smiling. "You'd be surprised at the surprises it gives me."

"They're not part of Jacobi's loot," he returned, fixing me with a hard look. "They came to me anonymously through the post this morning. Did you send them?"

"Me?" I repeated, blank. "My dear Corridan, as much as I like you, I think I should be able to resist sending you four diamond rings."

"You'd better cut out this fooling," Corridan said, his face growing red. "I have an idea these rings came from you."

"Quite, quite wrong. What gives you that idea?"

"It won't be difficult to trace them to you," he went on, ignoring my question. "The box and wrapping will tell me what I want to know."

"If you ask me," I said, beginning to get worried, "some lag stole those rings, had a change of heart, and sent them to you to return to their rightful owner."

"I thought so until we checked the rings," Corridan returned. "But we have no record of them being stolen. Try another yarn, and make it a better one."

"I must say you're damned unpleasant this morning," I said.

"Suppose you try. Why should I send you diamond rings? Tell me that."

"You might have stuck your nose into something that doesn't concern you, found the rings, and taken them, thinking they were part of Jacobi's loot. You had no means of checking them, so you sent them to me, knowing I'd recognize them if they belonged to Allenby. Well, they don't. I'm now going to look for the original owner, and if I find him, I'm going to persuade him to prosecute the thief. Maybe he knows who the thief is, and if he turns out to be you, my friend, I'll do my best to get you a stretch." He turned on his heel and stamped out.

I drank my whisky at a gulp, blotted my brow. And I thought Corridan didn't know his business! If Bradley talked it looked as if I was going to be in a nice jam. The first thing to do was to warn Crystal to be prepared when Corridan produced the box. Since it was her box, he might easily shake her if she wasn't forewarned. I called her number, explained what had happened.

"He's on his way right over," I said. "And he'll spring that box on you. Look out for it."

"Leave him to me, precious," Crystal said. "All my life I've wanted to be grilled by the police. I'll handle him."

"Well, don't be too sure of yourself," I warned her. "That guy's nobody's fool."

"Nor am I," she returned, "only over you. Did you enjoy yourself last night?" she added coyly.

"Enjoy is an understatement," I returned, grinning. "It was an experience that's marked me for life. I'll be back for an encore in a little while."

I hung up, lit a cigarette, brooded. I'd have to watch my step now.

Corridan was after my blood, and if he couldn't hang a murder rap on me, he might easily get me a stretch in jail.

I began to pace up and down. A gentle tap sounded on the door. I crossed the room, opened up, gaped.

Julius Cole stood in the doorway, his eyebrows raised, his head on one side.

"Hello, baby," he said, moving into the room. "I want to talk to you."

chapter twenty-one

A waiter passed, pushing a table on wheels before him. The table was set for someone's belated breakfast: a simple meal of coffee and rolls. He eyed Julius Cole; I noted his look of snobbish contempt. He went on, disappeared around the bend in the corridor, but Julius Cole didn't disappear. He sauntered into my room, smiling his secret smile, wagging his head, very sure of himself.

"Nice to see you again, baby," he said.

I let him in because I was too surprised to exert the effort to keep him out. Somewhere in my sub-conscious mind an alarm bell was ringing, warning me that trouble was on the way.

"What do you want?" I asked, leaning against the door.

Julius Cole looked around the room, peered out of the window.

"How nice," he said, his hands in his baggy trouser pockets. The grey suit he wore was shiny at the elbows, even on the back of the coat he had managed to collect grease spots. His bottle-green shirt was frayed at the cuffs; his white tie was grubby. "I've often wanted to see the Savoy from the inside. I had no idea they did you as well as this. The view alone must be worth the money." He gave me an arch look. "What do they charge for a room like this?"

"Suppose you tell me what you want," I said. "And then I'll call Corridan. He wants to see you."

He sat on the window seat, raised his eyebrows.

"I know," he said. "But you won't call Corridan."

I wondered if it might be a sound idea to hit him in the left eye, but resisted the temptation. I sat down.

"Go ahead," I said. "Something's crawling about in the thing you call your mind. What is it?"

He took a crumpled packet of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one.

Smoke drifted down his narrow nostrils.

"I want to borrow a little money," he said.

"I won't stop you," I returned briefly, "but you're in the wrong room. Try the desk. They might trust you. I don't."

He giggled. "I don't suppose you'd think it to look at me, baby," he said softly, "but one of my side-lines is blackmail. I'm here to blackmail you." He giggled again.

"What makes you think I'd be a good subject to blackmail?" I asked, suddenly wary.

"No one's a good subject to blackmail," he returned, pouting.

"Sometimes I wonder if the game is worth the risk." He fingered his tie with slender, grubby fingers. His finger-nails were black crescents.

"It's a big risk, you know. I have to be very careful how I select my victim. Even then I have made mistakes."

"Chalk this up as your biggest mistake yet," I said grimly. "I don't believe in blackmail; never did."

He stroked his clipped hair, smiled. "But then no one ever does, baby," he pointed out. "It depends entirely on the force of circumstances. In your case, I don't see how you can help yourself."

"By ramming my foot into your fat carcass," I said, eyeing him with distaste.

He flicked ash on to the carpet, shook his head. "So many people have wanted to do that. I've always taken care to convince them it wouldn't pay."

"Tell me," I said.

"I heard what you and Corridan said to each other," he said, giggled. "I was listening outside the door. I could get you hanged. That's not bad, is it?"

"I don't think you could," l said, shaken.

"Don't be obstinate, baby," he pleaded. "I wouldn't risk coming to London, coming here, unless I was sure it'd pay dividends. It was my luck that I heard what Corridan said. He wants me and he suspects I saw what happened in Madge Kennitt's flat. Well, I wouldn't disappoint him. I'd tell him."

"You saw nothing," I said.

"I know, but he doesn't know. I'll tell him you were in love with Netta. That Madge told you Netta and Peter French murdered Anne. You didn't want Madge to tell the police, so you tried to bribe her. She wouldn't play, and you lost your head and killed her. I saw you do it."

I drummed with my fingers on the chair arm. "You didn't, Cole," I said. "And you know it."

He nodded. "Of course I didn't, but that doesn't matter. Corridan expects me to say something like that and I will if you force me to."

"They'll want to know why you didn't tell them before," I said.

"Of course, I shall get into trouble, but then I don't anticipate it'll come to that. I was also watching you when you went to Selma Jacobi's flat. I saw Littlejohns enter after you had arrived, but I didn't see him come out."

"You get around, don't you?" I said.

"I've never even seen Selma's place, but I can tell Corridan that, can't I? He wants to get someone for these murders, and he'll jump at my evidence."

I knew Corridan would.

There was a long pause, then I said, "Corridan wouldn't be so pleased to learn you made a monkey out of him when you identified Anne as Netta. He'd give you a stretch for that."

Cole smirked. "Yes, baby," he said; "I've taken that into account too. But they'd stretch your neck, so I'm not really anticipating trouble. I don't think I shall have to go to Corridan because you'll pay me to keep quiet."

I lit a cigarette, smoked for a moment, thinking.

"You see, there's Netta to be considered too," Cole said in his soft, lisping voice. "She'll get into trouble too. Corridan will bring a murder charge against her. He's a hard man." He removed a hair from his coat and put it on the window seat with exaggerated care. "You must admit I have a strong hand. But you needn't worry. I'm not asking for much. I'm always modest in my demands. What do you say to a single payment of five hundred pounds? That's reasonable, isn't it?"

"But you'll be back in a week or so for more. I know the kind of louse you are."

He shook his head. "Don't call me names, baby. It's not kind. I don't do business that way. Give me five hundred pounds, and you're free to leave the country as soon as you like. Five hundred pounds would keep me going for a long time. I'm not extravagant, baby. I have simple tastes."

"I'd like a little time to think this over," I said. "Suppose you come back this afternoon?"

"What's there to think about?" he asked, wagging his head from side to side.

"It's just that I have to get used to the idea of being blackmailed," I returned, wanting to sink my fist in his fat, flabby face. "I also want to think of a way to get out of this. Right now, I don't see a way."

Cole giggled. "There isn't one, baby," he said. "Corridan would love to get his hooks into you. Besides, what's five hundred pounds to you? It's nothing." His grey-green eyes wandered around the room. "You're used to the good things of life. You wouldn't like to spend weeks in a cell. That's what it'd mean, even if they didn't prove you guilty: Weeks in a cell."

"You're quite a salesman," I said, getting to my feet. "Come back at three-thirty this afternoon. I'll either tell you to go to hell or I'll have the dough for you."

Cole shifted his fat carcass out of my reach. "All right, baby," he said, watching me. "Have the money in pound notes." He looked once more around the room, wagged his head. "It's nice. I might even book a room here. It'd make a change after that beastly flat of mine."

"I shouldn't," I said. "Not in that suit, anyway. They're fussy here."

A faint flush stained his pasty face. "That's not kind, baby," he said.

I watched him go, the frame and build of a truck-driver, sauntering along softly, insolently, like a dancer.

When he had rounded the bend in the corridor, I returned to my

room, poured out a stiff shot of whisky, sat down by the window.

Things were breaking a little too fast for me. I was being crowded. If I was going to solve this puzzle outside a cell, I'd have to move fast.

I thought for a few seconds, finished my drink, decided I'd have to see Netta. I jumped up, grabbed my hat, made for the door.

The telephone rang.

I hesitated, picked up the receiver.

"Harmas?"

I recognized Bradley's voice, wondered what he wanted.

"How are your front teeth, Bradley?" I asked. "I'm still undertaking painful extractions. If you have any left, let me know. I'll fix it for you."

I expected him to blow his top, but he didn't. He sounded almost mild.

"All right, Harmas," he said. "Never mind that stuff. We're quits now. I gave you a bad time, you gave me one. Let's forget it." I could scarcely believe my ears.

"So what," I asked.

"But I want my rings back. Harmas. They're worth two thousand pounds. Maybe you did take them for a joke. I'm not saying you stole them, but I want them back."

That was reasonable enough, I thought, but how was I going to give them back?

"Corridan's got them," I said. "You'd better ask him for them."

"I'm not interested in who's got them," he snapped. "I'm only interested in getting them back. You took them. You return them."

I wondered if Corridan would part, doubted it. I began to sweat.

"But I can't get them back without being arrested," I returned.

"Suppose you ring Corridan, tell him I took them for a joke, and ask him to return them to you. He'll try to persuade you to file a charge against me, but you needn't do that. That's the only way to get 'em back."

"If you don't deliver those rings by four o'clock this afternoon, I'll file a charge against you and I'll see it damn well sticks," Bradley snarled, hung up.

I brooded for a moment, rang Whitehall 1212. Someone told me Corridan was out of town, wouldn't be back until late. I thanked him, put the receiver on its cradle, scowled.

"Oh, the hell with it," I said.

I hurried to the elevator, rode down to the ground level, took a taxi to Cromwell Road.

I entered Mrs. Crockett's house, mounted the stairs to the first floor, stood for a moment listening. I heard nothing to alarm me, crossed to Madge Kennitt's door, rapped.

I called, "This is Steve, honey."

The door opened immediately. Netta stared at me, her eyes opening wide. I looked over my shoulder, expecting to see Julius Cole watching me. He wasn't. I stepped into the room, closed the door.

Netta was wearing a suit of almost transparent pyjamas. She looked cute, and if I hadn't so much on my mind she'd have given me a buzz. As it was I said sharply, "Put on some camouflage, kid. For interesting places a tourist map has nothing on you."

"What's the matter?" she asked, grabbing a silk wrap, putting it on. "Why have you come? Is something wrong?"

"Plenty," I said, sitting on the arm of a chair. "Things are moving. They're moving too damn fast for me, and I thought I'd better have a word with you."

She sat down on the chaise-longue. I thought of Madge Kennitt and the way she had looked, lying there with her throat cut.

"Don't sit there," I said sharply. "That's where she was found."

"Pull yourself together, Steve," Netta said, not moving. Her eves had hardened, were watchful. "You're not losing your nerve, are you?"

"Hell, no," I said. "Okay, sit there if you want to." I stared at her for a moment. "There's nothing wrong with your nerve, is there, Netta?"

She shook her head. "Not so long as you're with me. What's wrong, Steve?"

I told her how Corridan and Cole had visited me and what they had said. I told her about Bradley's phone call, too.

She listened without interrupting.

"Well, that's the set-up," I concluded. "How do you like it?"

"There's only one way out of this," she said, after a moment's thought. "We've both got to get out of the country. Even if they don't pin the murders on to you, you'll be in jail for weeks. Then what shall I do?"

"Yeah, I've thought of that," I said. "But if I run away I'm telling Corridan I'm guilty."

She jumped to her feet, ran over to me.

"Steve! Can't you see? You've got to get out while the going's good. You can write to Corridan when you get to America. You can tell him the whole story; but if you wait now, we'll never get away. French will catch up with me. You've got to save me and yourself."

I put my hand on her hip. Under the thin silk it felt nice. I remembered our more intimate days, patted her flank.

"All right," I said. "We'll get out while the going's good, and I'll give Corridan the works from a safe distance. Now, I suppose I'd better try to fix a plane."

"Let's go tonight," Netta said, gripping my arm. "Do you think we could get off tonight?"

"If we don't, we'll never get off," I returned. "Once they know I'm on the run, they'll watch every airport." I pulled her a little closer to me. "Bradley worries me. I might be able to handle Cole, but Bradley has a real grievance. Where did you get those rings from, Netta?"

"I didn't give him the rings."

"He said you did. He said he bought them off you for three hundred pounds."

She shook her head. "Of course not. I've told you what happened. I went to him, told him the truth, asked him for some money. He gave me two hundred pounds. He told you that yarn about the rings to shield me. I remember he always had a lot of jewellery in his office."

I snapped my fingers. "My God! I've been a sucker. I should have guessed he was lying. What a mug I was to have taken the rings. He can get me three months for that. It's robbery with violence."

"But he won't get you three months because you won't be here,"

Netta said. "How soon can you fix that plane?"

"Right now," I said, going over to the telephone. I dialled a number, waited. "Is that you, Bix?" I asked, when a man's voice came on the line.

The voice said, "Sure!"

"This is Steve Harmas. I'm coming to see you. This is important. When's your next trip?"

"Why, hello, Steve," he said. "Glad to hear from you again. What's the excitement?"

"I'll tell you when we meet. When's your next trip?"

"Twenty-two-thirty hours tonight," he returned. "Want to come with me."

"You bet I want to come," I said. "I'll be right over." I hung up, turned.

"Cross your fingers, kid," I said. "Maybe I'll be able to persuade him to take us. Get packed, and be ready for me at nine o'clock."

She grabbed hold of me. "You're wonderful, Steve," she cried, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Sure, I'm wonderful," I said, feeling like a heel, "but save the celebration until we're over the Atlantic."

I let her kiss me, but I didn't kiss her in return. It'd have been too much like the touch of Judas.

chapter twenty-two

By three-twenty I had completed my arrangements for the evening, and had returned to my room at the Savoy to await Julius Cole.

Since leaving Netta, I had seen Harry Bix, explained what I wanted him to do. Intrigued by the story I had to tell, he had immediately agreed to co-operate. I had then taken a taxi to the offices of the Morning Mail, and had spent an hour with Fred Ullman. Acting on the suggestions I had made the night before, Ullman had been working like a beaver, and had collected a mass of information which had to be acted upon promptly.

Corridan was down at Lakeham, and, although I made efforts to get into touch with him, was temporarily out of the picture. I knew he'd return by evening, but by then, I had to complete my case or fail altogether. In a way I was glad he wasn't around. His absence gave me a clear field and I took every advantage of it. When he did get back, he would find I had solved the Allenby case, and he was going to get the shock of his life.

But in the meantime, I had to have the cooperation of the police.

During my previous stay in London, I had been friendly with Detective-Inspector O'Malley of Bow Street Police Station. Corridan had introduced us, and O'Malley had been delighted to show me the workings of the magistrate's court. I decided I'd enlist his aid, and called on him. When I explained the reason of r n' call, produced my evidence, he had insisted on taking me to meet Corridan's chief at Scotland Yard. It was decided that immediate action should be taken.

Now back in my room at the Savoy, I relaxed, confident that if my plans worked out the way I hoped, by nightfall the Allenby case and the murders of Madge Kennitt and Henry Littlejohns would be solved.

I had scarcely time to run through my plans in my mind to be sure that nothing had been overlooked before a tap sounded on my door which told me Julius Cole had arrived.

I levered myself out of my chair, opened the door.

There he was, eyeing me expectantly, waggling his head. He had smartened himself up. Some of the grease stains had disappeared from his coat; he had changed the grubby white tie to a less grubby yellow one. In his buttonhole was a faded sprig of lilies of the valley.

"Hello, baby," he said. "I'm not too early, am I?"

"Come in," I said, holding open the door.

He sauntered in, looked around the room.

"You know, I like it," he said. "The more I see it, the better it looks." He eyed me hopefully. "Have you the money, baby?"

"Sure. It's right there in that desk."

He wasn't able to control his excitement, although he made an effort to do so. His face brightened, his eyes gleamed, he giggled.

"Five hundred pounds!" he exclaimed, rubbing his big, grubby hands together. "I can scarcely believe it."

"Sit down, Fatso," I said, closing the door. "You haven't got it yet, so don't get steamed up."

His smile slipped, but he jerked it up with an effort, eyed me cautiously.

"But you've made up your mind, baby?" he asked. "You're going to be sensible?"

"How do I know that after you've got the money you won't come back for more?" I asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Please don't talk like that," he said, giving me an arch look. "I assure you I don't do business that way. I like to think I'm an honest blackmailer. It may sound absurd to you, but I have my principles. I make a fair price, and I stick to it."

"I wouldn't trust you farther than I could throw you," I said. "Sit down. I want to talk to you."

He hesitated, then lowered his great flabby body into the armchair.

"I wish you wouldn't be so suspicious, baby," he complained, pouting. "My terms are straightforward. You give me five hundred pounds, I keep quiet; you leave the country. That's simple enough, isn't it? I can't do you any harm if you're not here, can I?"

"I haven't gone yet." I said, "There's nothing to stop you from double-crossing me while I'm waiting to leave, is there?"

"But I wouldn't do that," he protested. "It's not in my nature to do mean things."

"Remind me to cry over that lovely sentiment sometime," I said.

"Suppose Corridan makes things hot for you? How do I know you won't tell him it wasn't Netta but her sister who died?"

"Don't be silly, baby," he said. "If I told Corridan that, I'd get into trouble, wouldn't I?"

"It was her sister who died, wasn't it?"

He blinked. "Of course."

"How do you know? Have you ever seen her sister?"

"Of course," he repeated, picked his nose, stared at me thoughtfully.

"Why did you say it was Netta?"

"I don't think we have to go into that, baby," he said, shifting uneasily. "I had my reasons."

"How much is Peter French paying you to keep quiet?" I shot at him.

For a moment he looked startled, then he recovered himself, giggled.

"There's not much you miss," he said. "I can't tell you that. It'd be a

breach of confidence."

"All right," I said, shrugging. "Let's get down to business. You're demanding five hundred pounds from me or you'll give Corridan false evidence that will incriminate me with two murders. That is the position, isn't it?"

"That's the idea," he said, smirking. "I'm afraid I couldn't put that in writing. But between you and me that's the general idea, baby."

I nodded, satisfied.

"You can have your money," I said, "and God help you, Fatso, if you try to double-cross me. I'll come after you, and I'll pound you to a jelly."

"You have my word," he said with a pathetic attempt at dignity.

"That should be enough. You're an American, of course, so you can't be expected to appreciate that an Englishman's word is his bond."

"Get off your high horse, you fat louse," I snapped, sick of him.

He waggled his head. "Don't you think we've wasted enough time already? Where's the money?"

I went to the desk, opened it, took out the packet of pound notes I had meant to give Netta. I tossed them into his lap.

"There you are," I said, watched him.

He stared down at the money, his eyes popping out of his head.

He touched them, patted them.

"Take them and get out," I said.

"Do you mind if I count them, baby?" he asked, a catch in his voice. "It's not that I don't trust you, but it's more businesslike. Besides, you might have given me too much." He giggled explosively.

"Go ahead, but be quick about it. I can't stand the sight of you much longer."

There was a long pause while he counted the notes. He was trembling with excitement, and completely absorbed in the sound the notes made as they rustled in his fingers.

Finally he straightened, nodded. There was a gleam of incredulous triumph in his eyes. "Well, baby," he said, "I didn't think you'd be so easy. I thought I was going to have a lot of trouble with yon." he stuffed the notes into his hip pocket, smiled his secret smile. He wasn't pleasant to look at.

I laughed at him.

"Get out, you fat louse," he looked down at the faded sprig of lilies in his buttonhole. He took it out, laid it on the table. "Something to remember me by, baby," he said, giggled. That was too much for me.

"And here's something to remember me by, Fatso," I said, hauled off and landed him a sock in his right eye.

He reeled back against the wall, his hand to his eye. For a moment he remained there, stunned, then he cringed away, moaning.

"You beast!" he whimpered. "Oh, you beastly, rotten cad!"

I made a threatening move towards him. He rushed to the door, yanked it open. Waiting for him in the passage outside was an oversized, plainclothes dick.

Cole blundered into him, received a violent shove which sent him staggering back. The plainclothes dick smiled at him.

"Hello, dear," he said.

Cole, still holding his eye, stared at him for almost a minute, then his face crumpled and his knees sagged.

The dick advanced on him. Cole retreated.

I kicked the door shut when the dick was in the room.

"So you anticipated you were going to have trouble with me, did you?" I said grimly. "Boy! Is that an understatement."

I crossed over to the bathroom, opened the door. "Okay, O'Malley, you can come out now."

Detective-Inspector O'Malley came out, followed by another plainclothes dick who had a notebook in his hand.

"Did you get it all down?" I asked.

"Every word," O'Malley said, rubbing his hands. "The sweetest little statement I could wish for. If he doesn't get ten years, may I be hung for a liar."

The three dicks grinned at Cole. O'Malley walked up to him, touched his arm.

"I'm Detective-Inspector O'Malley of Bow Street, and these are police officers," he said, waving his hand to the two plainclothes dicks. "It's my duty to arrest you and charge you with attempted blackmail. And I have also to caution you that anything you say will be written down and may be used in evidence at your trial."

Cole's face turned green.

"You can't do this to me," he squeaked. "That's the man who must be arrested. He's a murderer." He pointed a trembling finger at me. "He killed Madge Kennitt and Henry Littlejohns. I saw him do it! You can't arrest me. I'm an honest citizen."

O'Malley grinned.

"You can tell that to the judge," he said soothingly. "You come along with me."

The two plainclothes dicks closed in on him. One of them whisked my money from Cole's pocket, handed it to O'Malley.

"We'll have to keep this," O'Malley said to me. "But you'll get it back after the trial."

"I hope so," I returned with a grin. "I'd hate to think it might go to your sports fund."

The three dicks laughed.

"Come on," O'Malley said to Cole. "We'll make you nice and snug in

a cell."

Cole started back. "He's a murderer, I tell you," he shouted frantically. "Arrest him! He'll leave the country if you don't. Do you hear? He'll leave the country."

"Now don't excite yourself, dear," one of the plainclothes dicks said. "If you come quietly I'll give you a nice cup of cocoa at the station."

Cole took his hand away from his eye which was closed and swollen.

"He assaulted me," he shrilled. "I wish to charge him with assault. Arrest him!"

O'Malley looked pained. "Did you do that?" he asked me, shaking his head sadly.

"Me?" I said, shocked. "I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing. He was so anxious to spend his money, he hit his poor eye against the door handle as he rushed out."

O'Malley guffawed.

"You must have been in a hurry," he said, winking at Cole.

I walked up to Cole, smiled. "So long, louse," I said. "The next time you try blackmail, don't pick on a newspaper man. See you in ten years' time."

They took Cole away. He went speechless, dazed, stupefied. At the door, O'Malley looked over his shoulder.

"See you tonight," he said.

"Sure. Corridan'll be back then," I returned. "I wouldn't miss seeing his face when I spring my little surprise for all the Scotch in London."

"Speaking as a teetotaller, nor would I," O'Malley said piously.

chapter twenty-three

The clock in Mrs. Crockett's hall was striking the half-hour after seven as I crept up the stairs to Madge Kennitt's flat. No one saw me enter the house. It was a relief to know that Julius Cole wouldn't appear on the landing to waggle his head at me.

I listened outside Madge's door, heard nothing, tapped gently.

"It's Steve," I said.

There was a pause, then the door opened. Netta, in a red and white silk dress, let me in.

I entered the room, closed the door.

"Hello," I said.

"You're early, Steve," she said, putting her hand on my arm. "Is it all right?" Her eyes were deep set in dark sockets. She seemed anxious, nervy.

I nodded. "I think so, I said. " I've talked to Bix. He wants to see you."

"Wants to see me?" she repeated, frowning. "But, why?"

"You don't know Bix. He's a crazy guy," I returned. "He says he won't risk his job to fly some dumb-belle to the States. I told him you were the ace of pin-ups, but he thinks the women I go around with wear over-shoes and red flannel. The only way to convince him is for you to meet him. If you kid him along he'll take us. It's just his way of making things difficult. I've fixed for us to have a drink with him right away."

"But there isn't time," she said, worried. "And it's dangerous; the police may see us. I don't like this, Steve. Why didn't you bring him here?"

"I couldn't," I said. "He had to do things. There's nothing to worry about. We're meeting him at a pub off Knightsbridge. I have a car outside. We'll talk over things with him; then he'll go on back to the airport, we'll come back here, pick up your luggage and fellow on. The plane doesn't leave until ten-thirty. There's plenty of time."

I could see she didn't like the idea, but there was nothing she could do about it.

"All right, Steve," she said. "You know best. I'll put on a hat and I'm ready."

I waited for her, wandered around the room, thought of Madge Kennitt, felt spooked.

Netta came out of the bedroom after a moment or so. Her hat looked like a saucepan lid, but it suited her.

"He'll fall for you all right," I said, regarding her. "You look swell." I

slipped my arm through hers. "Come on. On your toes. We don't want Mrs. C. to jump us on our way out."

We sneaked down the stairs and into the Buick I had rented for the evening.

As we drove along the Cromwell Road, Netta said, "What's been happening, Steve? Did you give Ju the money?"

I was expecting that one, and had my lie ready.

"Yeah," I said. "he got it, the rat, and I only hope he won't double-cross us before we get out of the country." I gave her a quick look, saw she had turned pale, was tight-lipped.

"When did you give it to him?" she asked, a catch in her voice.

"Three-thirty this afternoon," I told her. "Five hundred pounds. It's a lot of money, Netta."

She didn't say anything, sat staring straight ahead, a hard look on her face.

As we pulled up outside a small pub in a back street off Knightsbridge, she said, "And Jack Bradley? Have you heard anything from him?"

"No," I said. "There was nothing I could do about him. Corridan was out of town. I couldn't get the rings without asking him first. Bradley's ultimatum expired at four o'clock. For all I know the cops are looking for me right now. If they are, they're too late. I pulled out of the Savoy this afternoon. All my stuff is in the back of the car. I'm ready to go."

We got out of the Buick.

Netta looked up and down the street. "You're sure it's safe, Steve?" she asked, hanging back. "It seems madness to me to come here where we can be seen."

"Take it easy," I said. "It's safe enough. This pub's as dead as a dodo. They'd never think of looking for us here." I hurried her across the pavement into the pub.

Harry Bix in his leather flying-blouse on which was painted a diving albatross, his squadron insignia, was propping up the counter, a Scotch and soda in his hand.

There were only two other men in the bar. They sat in a far corner, and didn't even look up as we entered.

Bix, fleshy, powerful, good-natured, straightened when he saw us.

He took one look at Netta, pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

"Hel-lo!" he exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. "You certainly picked yourself a pippin. Pin-up girl! I'll say!"

"Netta, this is Harry Bix," I said, pushing her forward. "Shake hands with Army Air Corps No. 1 pilot. And if he doesn't always act as if he was used to wearing shoes, forgive him. He's just out of the jungle."

Netta slipped her hand into Bix's large paw, gave him a dazzling smile which rocked him back on his heels.

"Lady, what makes you go around with a heel like him?" he asked earnestly. "Didn't you know he has two wives, and eighteen children, and he's clone a ten-year stretch for criminal assault?"

Netta laughed, nodded. "That's why I like him," she said. "I'm that sort of a girl."

"For God's sake!" he said, startled. "Do you really like him or is it his dough you're after?"

"A little of each," she said, after pretending to consider his question.

"Well, I guess that calls for a drink. How's about starting a famine in whisky or would you prefer something more fancy?"

"Whisky's all right with me," she said.

Bix waved to the barmaid, ordered two double whiskies. He turned back to Netta.

"Where've you been hiding yourself all this time? I thought I knew all the juicy dames in London."

"And I thought I'd met all the lovely Americans until now," she replied.

Bix blew out his cheeks, punched me in the ribs.

"Brother, you're through. Go outside and oblige me by breaking a leg."

"She's just kidding," I said. "That girl's got an ice-cream cone where her heart's supposed to be. Why, ten minutes ago, she told me all Army Air Corps personnel were jerks, didn't you Netta?"

"But I hadn't met Harry then," Netta protested. "I take it all back."

Bix leaned close. "We're the salt of the earth, sugar," he said.

"They say so in the newspapers, and newspapers don't kid their readers."

"Not much," I said.

When the barmaid had served the whiskies and had gone to the far end of the counter, Bix said, "So you want to make a trip with me, do you?"

Netta regarded him, suddenly serious. She nodded. "Will you trust me to get you there safely?" he asked.

"I'd trust you in an aircraft, but nowhere else," she returned.

Bix roared with laughter. "Say, this baby is quite a kidder, Steve. That's a pretty hot line to hand to a guy like me. Lady, I was kidding just now. Dames don't mean a thing to me. You ask Steve; he'll tell you."

"That's right," I said. "Dames don't mean a thing to Min, but put him alone with one dame and see what happens."

"Why, you rat . . ." Bix began, indignant.

"And suppose he isn't to be trusted?" Netta asked. "I wouldn't scream for help."

"You wouldn't?" Bix asked, his eyes popping. "Is that on the level?"

He looked at me. "Beat it, three's-a-crowd, you're in the way."

"Suppose we cut out this cross-talk and get down to business?" I urged. "Now you've seen her, will you play?"

Bix sipped his whisky, eyed Netta, eyed me.

"Yeah, I guess I can't refuse a honey like her," he said. "But it's a hell of a risk."

"Skip it," I said. "You know it's dead easy. Don't listen to him, Netta, he's trying to be important."

"Seriously, is it risky?" Netta asked; her eyes searching Bix's face.

For a moment Bix wrestled with the temptation to exaggerate, decided against it. "Well, no," he admitted, scowling at me. "Once you sell the pilot the idea and you've already done that, it's easy enough. We'll meet at the gates of the airport, go in together, have a drink at the mess. I'll then offer to show you over my kite and we'll go down to the dispersal point. No one will be around if we get down there before twenty-two-fifteen hours. You two will get into the kite, and I'll show you where to hide. We take off at twenty-two-thirty hours. When we get to the other side, there'll be a car waiting for me. All you have to do is to get in the back. I'll dump my kit and some rugs on top of you and off we go. Once we're clear of the airport, you can come up for air, and I'll drop you off wherever you want to be dropped off."

Netta thought for a moment. "It's really as simple as that?"

"That's right. I've done it before, and I'll do it again. But I warn you, I claim a kiss from my passengers."

"You won't kiss me," I said coldly. "I'd rather swim the Atlantic if those are your terms."

"So would I," Bix said hurriedly. "I wasn't talking to you, lug."

Netta smiled at him. "There won't be any difficulty about that," she said. "I think the terms are most reasonable."

We kidded back and forth for twenty minutes or so, sank a number of whiskies, and then, at eight-ten, Bix said he guessed he'd better be getting along.

"See you two outside the airport at twenty-one-forty-five," he said. "And don't get steamed up. It's in the bag." He took Netta's hand. "See you soon," he went on. "Don't forget if you ever grow tired of that lug, I'm next on the list. Redheads go straight to my heart."

"I'll remember," she said, gave him a long stare which seemed to weaken him, then she smiled. "If I see much more of you," she continued, "I think I'll be changing my mind about my lug, although he is a nice lug if you overlook his table manners."

"He can't help that," Bix said, grinning. "He hasn't been house-broken like me."

He took himself off as if he was walking on air.

The moment the door swung behind him, Netta lost her gaiety,

looked anxiously at me.

"Are you sure it's all right?" she asked. "He's such a boy. Are you sure you can trust him to get us across safely?"

"Quit fussing," I said. "That guy's done over a hundred operational trips. He's bombed Germany from hell to breakfast and back again. Maybe he does look like a boy, but don't let that fool you. When he says he'll do something, he does it. He's taken a liking to you, and that means we're as good as there."

She heaved a little sigh, took my arm.

"All right, darling," she said. "I won't fuss, but I'm nervous. What do we do now?"

"We go back 'to the flat, pick up your things and get over to the airport. Come on, Netta, the journey's begun."

Ten minutes later we were back in Madge Kennitt's flat.

"You're travelling light, I hope?" I asked, as I tossed my hat on the chaise-longue.

She nodded. "Just a grip. I hate leaving all my lovely dresses, but I'll be able to buy what I want on the other side." She came over to me, put her arms around my neck. "You've been wonderful to me, Steve. I can't thank you enough. I don't know what I'd've done without you."

For a moment I felt like a heel, then I remembered the way Littlejohns had looked, curled up on the floor, and that stiffened me.

"Forget it," I said. "You ready now?"

She said what I hoped she would say: what I knew the success or failure of my plan depended on.

"Give me five minutes, Steve," she said. "I want to change. This get-up isn't warm enough for an air trip."

"Go ahead. Get into your woollies," I said. "I'm damned if I don't come in and help you."

She laughed uneasily, went to the bedroom door.

"You keep out, Mr. Harmas," she said with mock severity. "It's a long time since you saw me undress, and I'd be shy."

"You're right," I said, suddenly serious. "It is a long time: too long, Netta."

But she wasn't listening. She went into the bedroom, shut the door. I listened, heard the key turn.

I sat on the chaise-longue, lit a cigarette. The palms of my hands were damp, the muscles in my thighs twitched. I was in a regular fever of excitement.

Five minutes crawled by, then another five. I could hear Netta moving about in the next room. Cigarette ash covered the carpet at my feet.

"Hey!" I called, my nerves getting the better of me. "Time's getting on, Netta."

"I'm coming," she said; a moment later I heard the lock snap back and she came out. She was wearing a light wool sweater, coal-black slacks and a fur coat over her arm. In her right hand she carried a fair-sized suitcase. "Sorry to be so long," she said, smiling, although her face was pale, her eyes anxious. "It's only five minutes after nine. Do I look all right?"

I went over to her. "You look terrific," I said, putting my arm around her waist.

She pushed me away almost roughly, shook her head, tried to keep the smile on her lips. It looked lopsided to me.

"Not now, Steve," she said. "Let's wait until we're safe."

"That's all right, kid," I said.

She'd pushed me off too late. I'd already felt what she had on under the sweater, around her waist.

"Come on, let's go."

I picked up my hat, glanced around the room to make sure we'd left nothing, crossed to the door.

Netta followed. I carried her bag. She carried the fur coat on her arm.

I opened the door.

Facing me, his eyes frosty, his mouth grim, stood Corridan.

chapter twenty-four

Netta's thin scream cut the air with the sharpness of a pencil grating on a slate.

"Hello, Corridan," I said, soberly, stepping back, "so you're in at the finish after all."

He entered the room, closed the door. His pale eyes looked inquisitively at Netta. She shrank away from him, her hand to her face.

"I don't know what you two are doing in here," he said coldly, "but that can wait. I have a warrant for your arrest, Harmas. I'm sorry. I've warned you enough times. Bradley has charged you with stealing four rings and with assault. You'll have to come along with me."

I laughed mirthlessly. "That's too bad," I said. "Right now, Corridan, there's more important things for you to worry about. Take a look at this young woman here. Don't you want to be introduced?" I smiled at Netta who stared back at me, tense, her eyes glittering in a white face.

Corridan gave me a sharp glance. "Who is she?"

"Can't you guess?" I said. "Look at her red hair. Can't you smell the lilac perfume? Come on, Corridan, what the hell kind of detective are you?"

His face showed his astonishment.

"You mean it's . . . ?" he began.

I shook my head at Netta. "I'm sorry about this, kid," I said. "But you can't beat the rap now." I turned back to Corridan. "Of course. Meet Netta Anne Scott Bradley."

Netta recoiled. "Oh," she gasped furiously, then: "You — you bastard!"

"Soft-pedal the language, honey," I said. "Corridan blushes easily."

Corridan stared at Netta, then at me.

"You mean this woman's Netta Scott?" he demanded.

"Of course she is," I said. "Or Mrs. Jack Bradley, known as Anne Scott, if you like that better. I told you all along she hadn't committed suicide. Well, here she is as large as life, and I'll show you something else that'll interest you."

I grabbed hold of Netta as she backed away.

Her face was grey-white like putty; her eyes burned with rage and fear. She struck at me, her fingers like claws. I grabbed her wrists, twisted her arms behind her, held her against me.

"Take it easy, kid," I said, keeping clear of her vicious kicks. "Show the Inspector your nice line in underwear." I caught hold of her sweater, peeled it over her head. Then tucking her, screaming and

kicking, under my arm, I yanked down the zipper on her trousers, pulled in two directions.

Corridan gave an angry snort, stepped forward. "Stop it!" he exclaimed. "What the hell do you think you're doing."

"Skinning a rabbit," I said, carrying Netta over to the chaise-longue and forcing her face down on it. I had a job to hold her, but I at last got my knee in her back and pinned her.

Corridan grabbed my arm, but I shook him off.

"Take a look at that belt," I said, pointing to the heavy money belt that was strapped around Netta's waist.

Corridan paused, muttered to himself, stood away.

I undid the buckle, jerked off the belt, stood back.

Netta lay on the chaise-longue, her fists clenched, her breath coming in great sobbing gasps.

With a quick shake I emptied the contents of the belt on the carpet at Corridan's feet.

"There you are, brother," I said dramatically. "Fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery! Take a look. Allenby's loot."

Corridan gaped down at the heap of assorted rings, necklaces, bracelets on the carpet. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds gleamed like fireflies in the electric light.

"I'll kill you for this!" Netta screamed, suddenly sitting up. She sprang to her feet, flung herself at me.

I shoved her off so roughly that she sprawled on the floor.

"You're through, Netta," I said, standing over her. "Get that into your thick little skull. If you hadn't killed Littlejohns I might have played with you, but you killed him to save your rotten skin, and that let me out. What the hell do you think I am? A sucker? I wouldn't cover up anyone who did what you did to Littlejohns."

Netta crawled to her feet, then flopped limply on the chaise-longue, buried her face in her hands.

I turned to Corridan who was still staring at the heap of jewellery as if hypnotized.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," I said. "I promised myself I'd crack the Allenby case because you acted so damn high-hat. I've done it."

Corridan's face was a study. He looked at Netta, at me. "But how did you know she had the stuff on her?" he demanded.

"You'll be surprised how much I do know," I said. "She and Jack Bradley were behind the Allenby robbery. I'll give you all the facts, and then you can manufacture the evidence. Do you want to hear?"

"Of course, I want to hear," he said, knelt down, scooped up the jewellery, dropped it back into the belt. "How did you get on to this?"

He put the belt on the table.

"I got on to it because I never believed Netta committed suicide," I

said, lighting a cigarette and perching myself on the table. "I was sure she hadn't killed herself after I had searched the flat. Most of her clothes and all her silk stockings had vanished. I've known Netta for some time, and have a good idea of her character. She wasn't the type to commit suicide, and she had a passion for clothes. It seemed to me, after the body had been kidnapped, that some other girl had died in her flat, and Netta, taking fright, had run off with as many of her clothes as she could carry."

Corridan leaned against the wall, eyed me.

"You told me all that before," he said, "and I worked that out for myself anyway."

"Sure," I said. "But there was plenty still to puzzle me. For one thing, who was the dead girl? Then another thing foxed me. Why should Netta, although she'd taken time to pack her clothes, have left sixteen five-pound notes in the flat and that bunch of bonds worth five thousand pounds? That got me for some time until Madge Kennitt told me a girl and a man had been with Netta that night. The girl was obviously the one who'd died. The man either killed her or was Netta's accomplice. It seemed to me the reason why Netta had left the money in the flat was because she didn't trust her companion, and he didn't give her a chance to get the money from its hiding-place without him seeing her do it. So she had to leave it there, but hoped to collect it later, but I found it first." I glanced over at Netta, but she didn't look up. She sat with her head in her hands, motionless.

"Go on," Corridan said quietly.

"Who was the mysterious man, and why didn't she want him to know about the money?" I went on. "I've talked to Netta, and she has told me he was Peter French, who was Anne's lover. That's another way of saying he was Netta's lover. You see, Netta never had a sister. But we'll come back to Peter French in a moment.

"Nine months ago, Netta married Jack Bradley. For some reason they kept the marriage a secret, and they didn't live together except at weekends which they spent in a cottage at Lakeham, bought by Bradley as a hide-out for them both. Netta called herself Anne Scott when she was at Lakeham. She tells me that French killed her sister because she knew he had killed George Jacobi. Since she never had a sister, that was obviously a lie. Who then was the girl who had died in Netta's flat, and was later found in the cottage? I want you to get this clear, Corridan. The girl who was kidnapped from the mortuary and the girl we found in the cottage were one and the same."

Corridan pursed his lips. "But one was a redhead and the other was a blonde," he said. "How do you account for that?"

"Netta explained it to me," I said. "She tells me that French dyed the girl's hair and bleached it back to its normal colour after he had

removed the body to the cottage."

"Well, I'll be damned," Corridan muttered.

I nodded. "It wants a little believing," I said, "but after thinking it over, it seems to me that's what happened. If the girl wasn't Netta's sister, and I've proved beyond doubt that Netta never had a sister, then who was she and why was she murdered, and why was the murderer so anxious to prevent her being identified?"

"Have you found that out?" Corridan asked eagerly.

"I think so," I returned. "Not only have I found it out, but Littlejohns found it out, too. That's why he died."

"Who was it then?"

"Selma Jacobi, the wife of George Jacobi who was murdered by Jack Bradley," I said.

Netta sat up, glared across at me.

"It's a lie!" she screamed. "Jack didn't kill him. It was Peter French."

I shook my head. "Oh, no, it wasn't," I said gently. "Let's go back a bit." I slid off the table, began to pace up and down. Let's go back to the time when the American soldiers were being repatriated. Before then, Bradley had been content to make a big profit by selling bad hooch and fleecing the boys in any other way he could think up. But when they began to leave, his profits shrank. He had to think up some other way of making money. Apart from running gaming-tables, he also decided to go in for large-scale robbery. George Jacobi was an expert in this line. Bradley hooked up with him, and the Allenby robbery was planned. About this time Netta was married to Bradley and Jacobi married Selma. Allenby's place was near Lakeham, and Bradley killed two birds with one stone by buying the cottage at Lakeham. The robbery was organized from the cottage, and he also had a love nest for Netta and himself. Mrs. Brambee, Jacobi's sister, undertook to run the cottage for them. The robbery was successful, and the next move was to find some way to sell the loot. The stuff was too hot; neither Bradley nor Jacobi had the nerve to put it on the market. They sat on it, hoping that it would cool off. While waiting, they quarrelled over the split, and one night Bradley killed Jacobi in the Club, and dumped him in a Soho street."

"Is this guesswork or have you proof?" Corridan asked.

"It's guesswork," I admitted, "but she'll talk before long. They always do."

Corridan glanced at Netta, grunted. "Go on," he said.

"We'll leave Jacobi's death for a moment and talk about Littlejohns," I said, lighting a cigarette. "It's important because it decided me that Netta wasn't the Netta I used to know, and that I couldn't let her get away with murder. I liked Littlejohns. He had guts, and besides, he was working for me. I had told him all I knew about the case, and he

had spotted something I missed. He realized that Selma Jacobi figured somewhere in the case, and that she could very well be the dead girl in Netta's flat as well as the dead girl in the cottage at Lakeham. He hadn't seen Selma, but I had seen the dead girl. He wanted to surprise me, poor little guy. He found out where Selma used to live and went there in the hope of finding a photograph of her. He had planned to present me with the photograph, and when I had identified it as the dead girl, he was going to spring his surprise. He found the photograph. A scrap of it remained in his fingers when I found him. But Netta caught him. She realized that he was on to her, and to save her skin, she killed him. That's something I can't forgive, so I trapped her into thinking I was going to get her out of the country, knowing she'd try to smuggle Allenby's loot out with her."

"That still doesn't explain how you knew she had the loot," Corridan said, frowning. "You say this Peter French killed Selma Jacobi?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't say that. Netta told me Peter French killed Selma. But that's a lie. Peter French knows nothing about this business at all. He was a stooge, put up to lead me away from the real killer."

Netta got slowly to her feet, her face ghastly. Corridan took a step forward.

"Then who killed Selma Jacobi?" he demanded.

"The same person who killed Madge Kennitt," I said, moving across to the kitchen door. "Let me introduce you." I jerked open the door, stood aside. "Come on out," I said. "You've been in there long enough."

Detective-Inspector O'Malley and three plainclothes dicks moved into the room. They looked at me, at Corridan, at Netta.

"That's the guy who killed Selma Jacobi and Madge Kennitt," I said, jerking my thumb at Corridan.

chapter twenty-five

I expect you to exercise tact and control with Harry Bix," I told Crystal as I piloted her across the Savoy lobby to where Fred Ullman and Bix were examining the latest novels on the bookstall. "He's the kind of wolf who knows all the ankles. Don't encourage him, and if you don't stray away from me you should be safe enough."

Crystal said, "Shouldn't you have brought your poke bonnet and tambourine? Who wants to be safe, anyway?"

By this time Harry Bix had seen us, and nudging Ullman, he fingered his tie, giving us a loud hello.

"Well, well," he said, advancing to meet us. "Bluebeard does it again. How you collect these juicy dames beats me. You must have a fatal attraction or something."

I sighed. "Crystal, this is Harry Bix. Don't trust him. Even the wool he'll try to pull over your eyes is half cotton. Harry, this is Miss Godwin. I'll trouble you to keep your hands in your pockets while you talk to her, and just to keep the record straight, she is my property. The gentleman with the bags under his eyes, lurking in the background, is Fred Ullman. Fred, Miss Godwin."

Ullman said how do you do, looked a little bored, but Bix elbowed him farther into the background, beamed at Crystal.

"This is the most exciting moment in my life," he said, taking her hand. "You're not really his property, are you? A dish as lovely as you wouldn't waste herself on a half-dead numskull like him, surely?"

I unfastened their hands, took Crystal firmly by her elbow.

"Paws off," I said. "This is the one blonde I intend to keep for myself. Away to your own hunting-ground." I convoyed Crystal across the lobby into the grillroom. "Come on, let's eat," I continued. "And, Fred, keep that woman-snatcher out of range."

"Why you fellows make such a fuss about women defeats me,"

Ullman said sourily. "All my life I've kept away from women, and look at me."

"You look; I've seen you," Crystal said tartly.

When we had all settled down at a corner table and had ordered a meal, Harry Bix said, "We are gathered together here tonight, not to be fed from any charitable reasons, but because Arsene Lupin here," he waved in my direction, "wishes to shoot off his mouth on the subject of his own cleverness, and has naturally to bribe us to listen."

Crystal tugged at my sleeve, asked me in a whisper why Bix called me Arsene Lupin, and wasn't Lupin French for rabbit?

I whispered back that the French for rabbit was lapin, and that

Arsene Lupin was one of the world's greatest detectives.

She then wanted to know what that had to do with me.

"Shush, woman," I said, annoyed. "You're showing your ignorance."

"As a newspaper man I have to make sacrifices," Ullman said wearily. "I am prepared to eat his food and to suffer the sound of his voice so long as he'll explain in detail the story behind Corridan's arrest. That is something the great British public wish to know, and it's my painful duty to tell them."

"Not in detail," Bix pleaded. "There're so many more interesting things to do than to listen to details," and he leered suggestively at Crystal, who leered back.

I tapped him on the shoulder. "That blonde is my property," I reminded him. "If it wasn't in such an inaccessible spot I'd show you where I've branded her with my personal seal, so paws off and I'll trouble you to keep your dirty looks to yourself."

Crystal said she liked his dirty looks, and could she have a few more please?

"Can't you control these two?" Ullman demanded. "I want the story if they don't. Why you bring a blonde to a meeting like this beats me. Blondes are a menace to society."

"That's not very polite," Crystal said, a little hurt.

Ullman eyed her coldly. "The only woman I've ever been polite to was my mother," he told her.

Crystal said she was surprised to hear he ever had a mother, and did the old lady die of a broken heart?

"Quiet," I said hurriedly as Ullman began to grow hot.

Bix said would it be an idea if Crystal and he went for a walk along the hotel corridor while Ullman and I bored each other to death?

"Will you please pipe down," I growled, thumping the table.

"Well, come on," Ullman said impatiently. "You've run me ragged these last days digging up information. How did you get on to Corridan?"

"Suppose I tell you the setup from the beginning?" I suggested.

"Then even Crystal, dumb as she is, will be able to follow. Ouch!"

I massaged my shin, told Crystal to behave herself, hurried on before there were more interruptions.

"As you know, Jack Bradley, to recoup his losses, installed two roulette tables in the Club," I began. "There's no future in that kind of racket unless you have adequate protection. Bradley was smart enough to realize that, and he looked around for a likely bird in the police force who'd give him this protection."

"And he picked on Corridan?" Ullman said.

"Don't interrupt," Crystal reproved him. "My father says that people who interrupt . . ."

"Never mind your father now," I broke in hastily. "Just pipe down, honey, and let me do the talking." I looked over at Bix. "And that's my knee you're fondling under the table just in case you thought it was Crystal's."

Bix snatched his hand away, had the grace to blush. He looked at Crystal reproachfully. She giggled.

"Yes, he picked on Corridan," I went on as Ullman began to scowl again. "Corridan was, at that time, a rising star at the Yard, and was handling the club rackets. Bradley offered him a big cut of his profits if he'd tip him when a raid was likely to be made. It was easy money; Corridan fell for it. Then George Jacobi appeared on the scene . . . ."

"How much better this'd be if it was illustrated with lantern slides," Bix said regretfully. "Imagine a slide depicting the arrival of George Jacobi in a snowstorm. How gripping that'd be."

"Especially if the slide was upside-down," Crystal said, giggling over the hors d'oeuvre.

"I'll turn you upside-down and . . ." I snarled.

"Never mind these cretins," Ullman said. "Go on, for God's sake."

"Jacobi was an expert jewel thief and was planning to steal Allenby's anti-invasion nest-egg, worth fifty thousand pounds," I said, scowling at Crystal, who made faces at me. "But Jacobi knew he couldn't handle a job as big as that on his own. . . ."

"The weak sister!" Bix said in disgust. "If it'd been half that amount I'd've done it."

"So would I," Crystal chimed in. "I'd've done it for a quarter the amount."

"And he suggested Bradley should come in on it with him," I went on, ignoring the interruption. "Bradley thought it'd be an idea to get the police on his side, and he put the proposition to Corridan, offering him a third of the spoils if he acted as inside man after the robbery, steering suspicion from Jacobi."

"That was smart," Ullman said approvingly. "I suppose you got all this from Netta?"

"Yeah. She talked. Boy! How she talked. Well, Corridan was after as much money as he could get his claws on, so he agreed to play. Netta now comes on the scene. Nine months ago, she and Bradley married. Bradley couldn't get her any other way, but he kept the marriage quiet. This arrangement suited Netta as she could continue to live on her own supported by Bradley, and if Bradley ever got tired of her she would be taken care of in the divorce settlement. Bradley bought the cottage at Lakeham for his robbery headquarters and as a love nest for Netta and himself.

"The gang consisted of Bradley, Mrs. Brambee, Jacobi, Julius Cole and Corridan. The robbery was successful, but Bradley and Jacobi

quarrelled over the split. Bradley killed Jacobi. Netta was present at the shooting."

"This is improving," Bix said, brightening. "Don't rush over the gory details."

"Jacobi was killed with a Luger pistol which Bradley had brought back as a souvenir of the First World War. His name was engraved on the pistol butt, and although the name had been erased, Bradley knew the police would be able to read it under ultra-violet rays. If the gun was ever found, he'd swing for the killing. Netta was by now tired of Bradley and had fallen for Corridan. She took the Luger while Bradley was dumping Jacobi's body in a Soho street, and decided to make capital out of it."

"What some women will do for money," Crystal exclaimed, shocked. "Why is it I never have a chance to show how unscrupulous I could be?"

"Netta was scared to approach Bradley direct," I went on, "so she suggested to Corridan that he should blackmail Bradley, and the two of them share the proceeds. Corridan agreed, but he wanted the gun. He was using Netta for his own profit, and he didn't trust her. Netta wouldn't let him have the gun. It was her security in case Corridan tried to gyp her."

"I'd trust you with everything of mine, precious," Crystal said, fondling my hand.

"I'll have that down in black and white when there's a spare moment," I said, patting her. "But keep quiet and let me get on. Eat up your nice chicken, and don't spill any down your pretty dress."

"When you two have stopped drooling over each other," Ullman said in disgust, "you might get on."

"Corridan put the screws on Bradley, who paid up," I continued. "As Corridan didn't dare show his face at the Club in case he was seen, and as Netta wasn't supposed to be in this blackmailing racket, Mrs. Brambee was detailed to collect the money each week.

"Well, that was the set-up until Selma Jacobi discovered that Bradley killed her husband. Cole told her this because he wanted to get even for not receiving a cut from the money Corridan was getting from Bradley. But Cole didn't tell Selma that Corridan was hooked up with Bradley. He was scared of Corridan. Selma went to Corridan, knowing he was in charge of the Jacobi investigation, and told him what Cole had told her. Imagine Corridan's feelings. If he took action, he'd dry up his own source of income, and Bradley would squeal on him. If he didn't, then Selma would go to a higher authority at the Yard, and he'd get caught that way. His only way out was to get rid of Selma. He took her along to Netta's flat, drugged her, and between the two of them they set the stage for suicide."

By this time we had reached the coffee stage of the meal.

"For the love of Mike let's have some whisky with this," Bix implored. "Listening to you gives me a thirst."

I ordered whiskies, and a brandy for Crystal.

"Before Selma was murdered," I went on, after the drinks had arrived, "Bradley had found out that Netta and Corridan were lovers. Bradley told Netta he had given orders to Frankie to lay for her and splash her with vitriol. Whether this was Bradley's idea of getting even, or whether Frankie was really going to do it, I don't know. Netta swears he would have done it, and knowing Frankie I think it's likely. Anyway, Netta was terrified and she decided it'd be safer to drop out of sight. Selma's body offered the opportunity. Corridan agreed to help, and they dyed Selma's hair the same shade as Netta's, bribed Cole to identify her as Netta, passed the news on to Bradley that Netta had killed herself. Do you follow all that up to now?" I asked, looking around.

"Keep going," Bix sighed. "My brain's numbed, but the sound of your voice has a soothing effect on it."

"Now I turn up," I continued. "Bradley was going to the mortuary to identify the body, so was I. Corridan had to work fast. He arranged for one of his men to move the body from the mortuary to the cottage at Lakeham. This was for my benefit as I had found the envelope addressed to Anne Scott, and had jumped to the conclusion that Anne was Netta's sister. I was allowed a glimpse of the body, then it was taken to the Horsham mortuary and destroyed by fire before Bradley could see it. Got all that?"

"Complicated, but smart," Ullman said, nodding his head. "Then what?"

Bix groaned. "You're a whale for punishment," he said, sneaking my whisky and drinking it before I could stop him. "Me—I've had about enough."

"The next bit's interesting," I promised. "It shows how clever I am."

"We'd better stay for that," Bix said to Crystal, "otherwise he'll stick us for the check."

"Bradley had given Netta five thousand pounds' worth of bonds as a wedding present," I went on. "He was anxious to get the money back. Frankie had been into the flat and had hunted for the bonds but had failed to find them. I found them, and suspecting that I had them, Frankie attacked me, but I beat him off."

"You can imagine how pleased Corridan was when I presented him not only with the bonds but also with the Luger," I continued. "He cooked up a yarn about the bonds being forgeries, and that the Luger belonged to a guy called Peter Utterly. Fred checked all this, found there was no such person as Utterly, and more important still that

there was no such person as Anne Scott, although Corridan had told me her record was in Somerset House."

"I have two profound observations to make at this point," Harry Bix broke in. "The first is that Corridan seems to have made a complete monkey out of you, and the second is that Fred seems to have done all the dirty work."

I nodded, grinned. "Correct," I said. "Applause for Mr. Ullman."

Crystal was so carried away that she kissed Ullman, who blinked at her, wiped off the lipstick, said, "Well, that's quite an experience. Perhaps I've been missing things. The only woman who ever kissed me was my mother."

"You ought to be sorry for her," Crystal said. "But I do like the taste of your shaving cream."

"Shut up, you two," Bix said, scowling.

"To continue," I said firmly. "The real give-away as far as Corridan was concerned was the murder of Madge Kennitt. I saw him after I had left Madge's flat to get her a bottle of whisky. I spotted Corridan outside the house, then when I returned I found Madge dead. She had written Jacobi's name in the dust, hoping it would give me a clue, which, of course, it did. Corridan arrived with his dicks, spotted the writing and blotted it out, hoping I hadn't seen it."

"But you had," Bix said. "Let's have some more whisky. The excitement is making me feel faint."

"I'd seen it all right," I went on, ignoring him, "and Fred put me on to the facts of the Jacobi case. Merryweather, the private dick I had hired, told Corridan that a black and yellow Bentley car had been seen at the cottage. I've traced the car to Corridan. He realized that he'd have to get rid of it, and sold it to a guy called Peter French. I happened to call on French and see the car, and Corridan found out that I'd seen it. He got Netta to try to persuade me that French was the killer of Madge Kennitt and I nearly fell for it.

"Well, the pace was getting too hot for Corridan. He decided to get the loot out of the country. I could help there, and Netta was the obvious choice to carry the stuff. Corridan had a showdown with Bradley, told him Netta was alive, and she was to take the loot to America. Bradley didn't like the idea, but Corridan had too much on him to raise objections. The loot was handed over to Netta, and she began to work on me. I played into their hands by taking Bradley's rings, and then getting myself hooked up with Littlejohns' murder. Cole helped by pretending to blackmail me, and I played it to look as if I was being stampeded to leave the country."

"I believe the end's in sight," Crystal said, sighing with relief.

"It is," I said. "I arranged with Harry to kid Netta into thinking he would fly us to the States . . ."

"And a very fine job I made of it, too," Bix said, beaming.

"I gave O'Malley the facts and he nabbed Cole, and laid a trap for Corridan. As luck would have it, Corridan heard that Cole had been arrested and guessed something had gone wrong with his plans. He took a chance and came on to Madge's flat just as Netta and I were about to leave for the airport. I think his idea was to knock me off and get Netta to persuade Harry to take her and Corridan to the States."

"As if I would," Bix said scornfully.

"Anyway, O'Malley was listening in and Corridan walked into the trap," I concluded. "If those two don't swing, I'll be surprised."

"You mean you thought all that out without any help?" Crystal said, gazing at me with unconcealed admiration. "I'm proud of you, precious. I should never have thought it of you."

"Come on," I said, signalling the waiter, "let's get out of here. If you two fellows haven't anything better to do, amuse yourselves; Crystal is going to amuse me—alone."

"Give me five minutes, precious," she said, getting to her feet. "I'm going to powder my nose and then I'll be very amusing."

When she had gone Ullman glanced at his watch, got to his feet.

"I've got to write this story," he said. "You two guys keep each other company. Say good-bye to Miss Godwin for me, will you? So long and thanks for the details."

Bix made a move to follow him, but I grabbed his arm.

"Listen, lug," I said, "you stick around where I can see you. I want you to stay right here until Crystal comes back, then I want you to fade quietly away."

"What makes you think she cares for you, you sap?" Bix demanded heatedly. "Why, I'll have her eating out of my hand if I can get her alone for two minutes."

"It may surprise you to know she's not that kind of a girl," I said with dignity. "Moreover, she eats off a plate, and if you start anything I don't like I'll make you think the war's started again."

We sat glowering at each other for half an hour, then we both became uneasy.

"Now I wonder where she's got to," I said, looking towards the grillroom door. "No sign of her. She can't be powdering her nose all this time."

I saw suspicion and alarm in Bix's eyes.

"You don't think that rat . . . ?" he began.

I jumped to my feet, made a dash into the lobby with Bix on my heels. There was no sign of her out there. I went up to the hall-porter, asked him if he had seen her.

"Miss Godwin left about twenty minutes ago, sir," he said, "with Mr. Ullman. I believe Mr. Ullman was saying something about showing

her his Press cuttings."

"And I was going to show her my tattoo marks," Bix wailed.

I tapped him on the chest. "It was the bags under that rat's eyes and his talk about his mother that did it," I said savagely. "The girl's dissolute."

"I like 'em that way, don't you?" Bix asked, leading me towards the bar.

I said I did.

THE END